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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Tuesday 25 April 2023

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I can announce the arrangements for the election of the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. Nominations will close at noon on Tuesday 16 May. Nomination forms will be available from the Vote Office, Table Office and Public Bill Office. Following the House's decision of 16 January 2020, only Members from the Conservative party may be candidates in this election. If there is more than one candidate, the ballot will take place on Wednesday 17 May between 11 am and 2.30 pm in the Aye Lobby. A briefing note with more information will be made available from the Vote Office.

Before we come to questions, I want to make it clear that while I understand that legal proceedings relating to the industrial action called by the Royal College of Nursing are active, I am prepared to allow discussion of the matter, given its national importance.

Oral Answers

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Gender Dysphoria: Waiting Times

1. **Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): If he will make an estimate of the average waiting time for treatment for gender dysphoria; and if he will make a statement.

[904600]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): NHS England does not routinely collect or publish data on waiting times for treatment for gender dysphoria, but I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that as of February this year 28,290 adults were waiting for a first appointment in England.

Mr Bradshaw: Four years on average for an initial appointment, and seven years at the south-west clinic in Exeter. With healthcare for trans people in effect non-existent, the Government planning to remove trans human rights from the Equality Act 2010, breaking their promise to ban conversion therapy and to reform the gender recognition process, and now threatening to force schools to out trans students to their parents, can the Minister see why this tiny and particularly vulnerable minority feels under attack by the Government, and that some who can afford to are even leaving the country for a less hostile environment?

Maria Caulfield: I can reassure the right hon. Gentleman that we are putting an additional £7.9 million into four new pilot gender identity clinics, because we want services to improve and waiting times to come down. The four new pilot services are now operating in Greater Manchester, Cheshire and Merseyside, East of England and London, and a new clinic will be opening in Sussex later this year. The four pilot studies have already removed 3,400 patients from the waiting list and I am hoping the fifth clinic will go further.

Health Inequalities

2. **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce health inequalities in deprived areas.

[904601]

23. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Whether he has made a recent assessment of the potential relationship between poverty and life expectancy.

[904623]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay): The Government are committed to our levelling-up mission to narrow the gap in healthy life expectancy by 2030. That is why, in October, we committed an additional £50 million to 13 local authorities to tackle inequalities and why we are also setting out our plans through the major conditions strategy.

Rob Butler: Even in areas that people consider to be affluent, such as Buckinghamshire, health inequalities can be a serious concern. Figures from Opportunity Bucks show there is an eight-year difference in life expectancy between residents of the Aylesbury North West ward and the Ridgeway East ward, both of which are in my constituency, yet the funding for those areas is essentially the same. Will my right hon. Friend explain the steps he is taking to ensure that deprived communities, wherever they are in the country, get the additional help and support—not necessarily purely financial—that they need to address their needs?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance of targeting health inequalities. Let me give the House a practical example. For lung cancer, patients are 20 times more likely to survive five years if we catch it early rather than late. Before the pandemic, those in the most deprived communities had the worst diagnosis. However, as a result of the targeted action we took with lung cancer check vans, they now have the best early diagnosis, which obviously has a big read-across for the five-year survival rate.

Gavin Newlands: The UK ranks 29th in global life expectancy. Professor Martin McKee from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine notes that one reason why the overall increase in life expectancy has been so sluggish in the UK is that it has fallen for poorer groups. The Scottish Government are doing everything they can within devolved competencies to fight poverty—the Scottish child payment and so on—but Westminster controls 85% of social security. What representations has the Secretary of State made to Cabinet colleagues and the Department for Work and Pensions about the damaging effects of their policies on life expectancy?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. He can see the success of the representations I made to Cabinet colleagues from the Chancellor's Budget statement, when he announced additional funding to tackle, in particular, health impediments to access to the labour market. He will also have seen the recent announcement of targeted action on, for example, smoking cessation, which is a particular driver of health inequalities. That includes our financial incentive scheme to pregnant mums, which obviously has a big impact on both their health and the health of their baby.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): It is becoming clear that in Cornwall the only way to get dental care is to go to a private dentist. In a deprived area, of which there are many across Cornwall, that is just not an option for people on low incomes. What can the Secretary of State do to increase the accessibility of NHS dentistry?

Steve Barclay: This issue concerns Members across the House. We have already started to reform the dental contract. We have introduced the £23 minimum value for units of dental activity and created more UDA bands, reflecting the fair cost. We are seeing more patients nationally—to March, up nearly a fifth on the year. But I recognise that there is more to do, and the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), is undertaking that work as we speak.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): Women in my constituency have a healthy life expectancy of only 56 years. Could the Minister explain why the difference between West Yorkshire and North Yorkshire—where the Prime Minister has his constituency—is 10 years? Why should women have to put up with that kind of experience? What is his explanation of how that has happened?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Gentleman is right that we should narrow the health inequalities gap, and we are committed to doing that. That is why in the women's health strategy, which I set out in the summer, we committed to having women's health hubs as one-stop shops to tackle some of the gender inequality. It is also why, whether on obesity, smoking or lung cancer, we are targeting our screening and public health interventions to close the gap, which he is quite right to highlight.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Secretary of State is absolutely right: we should be narrowing the health inequalities in this country. It is just a shame that, on his watch, we are not. A baby born in Blackpool today will live eight years less than a baby born in Kensington. Under this Tory Government, health inequalities have widened in many parts of the country. They have scrapped their health disparities strategy and cut the number of health visitors by a third, and ordinary families are paying the price. Why does the Secretary of State not get a grip, adopt Labour's plan to scrap the non-dom tax status and train 5,000 new health visitors, so that every child has a healthy start to life?

Steve Barclay: There is consensus in the House on our desire to close the health inequality gap—everyone agrees that is a key aim. The hon. Gentleman seems to have written the question before hearing my answer. I just gave a practical example of how we have transformed the early detection of lung cancer. He raised the public health grant, and I am happy to update the House that we are delivering 2.8% funding growth in the public health grant to help local authorities.

It is also about areas such as obesity and access to employment, which can have a big impact on mental health. The Chancellor announced specific funding—*[Interruption.]* The shadow Minister chunters away about children; I am conscious that one does not want too long an answer, but let me give the example of mental health. In the Budget we announced extra funding for a whole load of digital apps—*[Interruption.]* The shadow Minister keeps chuntering about children. Let me talk about the roll-out of our mental health support in schools, which is targeted at getting that early mental health intervention to school children.

Vaping: Young People

3. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle vaping by young people. [904602]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): I recently announced new measures to tackle youth vaping, including an extra £3 million for a new enforcement squad to tackle underage sales and illicit vapes. We also launched a call for evidence to identify opportunities to reduce youth vaping, which covers everything from the appearance, marketing and price to the environmental impact of vapes.

Bob Blackman: We would all encourage people to vape instead of smoke, but we do not know the long-term health impact of vaping at all. Reports suggest that one in seven young people are taking up vaping directly and therefore becoming addicted to nicotine, the most addictive drug known to humankind. What measures will my hon. Friend take to make sure that young people understand the risks of vaping?

Neil O'Brien: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for vaping. He is right; as well as the measures I mentioned, we have updated the guidance on Talk to FRANK, to illustrate for young people the dangers of consuming lots of nicotine.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): In 2021, the Government rejected my amendment to the Health and Care Bill to tackle smoking and youth vaping. England is now set to miss the Smokefree 2030 target by at least seven years, and countless children are now addicted to vapes. I welcome the U-turn, but what steps has the Minister taken to make up that lost time?

Neil O'Brien: We are taking action across the board on smoking. I think we are in agreement on what has to be done. That is why we recently announced that we are giving vaping kits to a million smokers to help them swap to stop. We are also bringing in new health incentives for all pregnant women so that we can help them

stop—that is based on good local evidence. We are taking preventative action, and I think the hon. Lady and I both want the same thing.

Adult Social Care: Funding

4. Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): What assessment has the Department made of the impact of funding allocations for adult social care on charitable and not-for-profit providers. [904603]

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): This Government back social care, which is why we are giving social care a record funding boost of up to £7.5 billion over the next two years. That extra funding will help local authorities increase the rates they pay to care providers, helping those providers in turn meet extra costs and increase staff pay.

Rebecca Long Bailey: Frontline charities, such as United Response and Age UK, have responded that the Government's plan falls far short of what is needed, including holding back the promised £250 million in social care workforce funding. Can the Minister promise that will be revisited with urgency, given that one in five over-80s have some unmet care needs and we are facing the highest social care vacancy rates on record?

Helen Whately: I can assure the hon. Member that not a penny of funding is being cut from adult social care. We are driving forward our reforms to the adult social care system, which have the workforce at their heart. We are introducing a new career path for the social care workforce, new care qualifications and new training, boosting the adult social care workforce and making sure people in that workforce get the recognition and rewards they deserve.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): The Minister says this Government back social care—I would love to see what the reality would be if they were against it. We already know that the Conservatives have completely failed to deliver their flagship policy of a cap on care costs, and over Easter we learned that they have broken the rest of their promises on social care too. The £500 million promised for the care workforce has been cut in half; the £300 million promised for housing in care has been slashed by two thirds; and as for the £600 million of other promises, your guess is as good as mine, Mr Speaker. They have not had the courage to announce this to Parliament or the nous to grasp that if people are not kept in their own homes, they end up stuck in hospital, with all the knock-on consequences for NHS waiting times and emergency care. Will the Minister tell us where all that money has gone? Why on earth should older and disabled people and their families ever believe the Conservatives on social care again?

Helen Whately: Out of that, I can pick one thing we agree on: the importance of helping people to live independently at home for longer and social care as a part of that. I say to the hon. Lady, as I said a moment ago, that we have not cut a penny of funding from our commitments to adult social care, both on adult social reform and on the historic £7.5 billion of adult social

care funding announced in the autumn statement. We are forging ahead with our reforms, with the workforce at their heart, because the workforce is crucial, hand in hand with the digitisation of social care, improving data, joining up health and social care, and supporting unpaid carers.

Smoking Cessation

5. Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage people to stop smoking. [904604]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): We have the lowest smoking rate on record in England, down from 21% in 2010 to 13% now, partly because we have introduced minimum excise tax on cheap cigarettes and double duty on cigarettes, but we know we have to go further. That is why we recently announced significant new funding to help a million smokers quit, through swap to stop, and introduced a new financial incentive for pregnant women. We are also consulting on new pack inserts, similar to those in Canada.

Mark Eastwood: As someone who was able to quit smoking using nicotine patches, following the advice at last year's Emley show, I welcome the measures announced by the Minister earlier this month to help us achieve our Smokefree 2030 target. Does the Minister agree that, in order to help even more people quit, we should continue to pursue harm reduction strategies such as swap to stop? That will ensure that we maintain our position as a world leader in public health.

Neil O'Brien: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend and congratulate him on quitting. The swap to stop scheme that we are rolling out nationally, which is the first of its kind in the world, is based on strong local evidence. We know it works from local pilots, which is why we are rolling it out at scale.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Smoking remains the biggest preventable cause of cancer and we know that smoking cessation services are vital to kicking the habit, but smokers in England face a postcode lottery when trying to access them. What is the Minister doing to ensure that everybody who needs those services is able to access them?

Neil O'Brien: Absolutely. In total, public health grants will go up by 5% in real terms over the next two years. We want to reduce the postcode variation, because these are important services. I am keen to speak to anyone who wants to work with us at a local level.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Welcome as the UK Government's recent announcement is to help more people in England to quit smoking, the Khan review's key recommendation to increase investment in smokefree policies, making the polluter pay by raising tobacco duty, was not mentioned. Product duty, as we all know, is a wholly reserved matter, so what representations have been made with Cabinet colleagues about implementing that recommendation to improve public health outcomes across all four of our nations?

Neil O'Brien: I recently had a very productive meeting with my Scottish Government counterpart. As I mentioned, we have already doubled the duty on cigarettes since 2010 and have brought in a minimum tax for the cheaper cigarettes. Of course, tax is a matter for the Treasury, but we will always be interested in things that can drive down smoking.

Maternity Care: South-west

6. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to improve access to maternity care in the south-west. [904605]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): Accessibility and choice remain high in the south-west. All but one trust in the region have a minimum of three birth options.

Wera Hobhouse: In my local council area, birthing units were closed in 2020. My constituents were promised a new midwife-led unit at the Royal United Hospital in Bath, but three years on it is still not up and running. The Minister will say that it is a funding decision for the local area, but it is an NHS England funding decision and the Government are the paymaster, so when will Bath get its midwifery unit at the RUH?

Maria Caulfield: I am very happy to contact the hon. Lady's local commissioners to find out the answer for her. However, I highlight the fact that the £7.6 million health and wellbeing fund is funding 19 projects across England to reduce health disparities in new mothers and babies. Two of those projects are in the south-west: the Trelya in Cornwall, a community-centred whole-family provision that takes a holistic approach to working with children and their families; and the Splitz Support Service in Wiltshire, which aims to improve community knowledge, access to and engagement with pre-conception and perinatal care. We are investing in the hon. Lady's region, but if she has a local funding issue I am very happy to speak to her local commissioning group on her behalf.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I am very glad that the maternity unit at the Royal United Hospital in Bath is rated as outstanding—we actually have very good choices in our local area. Does the Minister agree that choice is an important thing in maternity services? I am very glad that we have a first-class birthing centre in Chippenham and another in Malmesbury. One of the most important things is allowing women the choice to have the birth at home. That requires first-class midwifery support thereafter, which we also have in our area.

Maria Caulfield: Absolutely; choice is important. Only last month we published the single delivery plan for maternity and neonatal services, which I am sure Members across the House will already have read. It puts women at the heart of decision making and learns from the Ockenden and East Kent inquiries, to ensure that women have better choice when giving birth.

Urgent and Emergency Care

7. **Andrew Lewer** (Northampton South) (Con): What progress his Department has made on the delivery plan for recovering urgent and emergency care services. [904606]

9. **James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): What progress his Department has made on the delivery plan for recovering urgent and emergency care services. [904608]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay): The urgent and emergency care recovery plan sets out how we will invest more than £1 billion in increasing capacity, including 800 new ambulances, an additional 5,000 core beds and a further 3,000 virtual wards, to provide more than 10,000 out-of-hospital care settings.

Andrew Lewer: A key component of delivering better urgent care services will be expanding the network of urgent treatment centres across the country. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that a UTC in the major population centre of Northampton will be a high priority for the Department?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of UTCs. Nationally, they are above the national standard: 95.5% of patients are seen within four hours. He is a highly effective campaigner on health issues—he helped to secure the £2.8 million of investment for a new paediatric emergency department in his local area—and I know that he will be making a similar case to his local commissioners.

James Sunderland: Ultimately, the best way to improve urgent and emergency care services is through new build, purpose-built hospitals. Can the Secretary of State confirm where we are with the Royal Berkshire Hospital and Frimley Park?

Steve Barclay: As the House knows, I am extremely committed to modern methods of construction and modular building capacity. We are using that as a central component of our new 40 hospitals programme. My hon. Friend will know that the RAAC—reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—hospitals are very much part of that discussion, not just at Frimley but at King's Lynn, at Hinchbrook and in a whole range of other settings. He will also know that we are in a purdah period, so we are constrained in what we can say, but we will have more to say on this very shortly.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): We have had 13 years of Conservative government. There are record numbers of patients on waiting lists, record numbers of vacancies in the NHS, and a crisis of vacancies in social care. As for emergency care, the Government cannot meet their 18-minute target for category 2 ambulance responses. If the Conservatives were really concerned about the NHS, would we not be in a better position than this after 13 years?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Gentleman talks of 13 years. People are nearly twice as likely to be waiting for treatment in the Labour-run Welsh NHS as people seeking treatment in England, and, indeed, waits are longer in Wales: we have virtually eliminated two-year waits in England, whereas more than 41,000 people in Labour-run Wales are waiting more than two years.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I recently conducted a major surgery—[Laughter]—I mean a major survey of Rotherham residents to learn about their experiences of the NHS. A staggering 73% of respondents who had

called ambulances needing a category 1 response had waited longer than the seven-minute target time. Given that minutes can mean the difference between life and death, what are the Government doing to ensure that my constituents receive the life-saving support that they need, when they need it?

Steve Barclay: I know we have clinicians in the House who do second jobs, but I did not know that the hon. Lady had expanded that definition to such an extent! She is right to highlight, through her survey, the importance of timely care. There is currently a range of initiatives, such as the development of the NHS app, the review of the 111 service, and the examination of innovations such as artificial intelligence. We are looking into how we can manage demand in the case of, in particular, frail elderly people by noting changes in behaviour patterns, which will allow us to ensure that, for example, someone who has a fall at home receives care much earlier before arriving in the accident and emergency department, because we know that once frail elderly people have been admitted they will often be in hospital for about 14 days. The hon. Lady has raised an extremely important issue through her survey, and one on which we are focusing in our urgent and emergency recovery plan.

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

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): That urgent and emergency care plan, which was announced in January, was received with acclaim by me and, indeed, with wide acclaim. It was described as a two-year plan to stabilise services by, for instance, returning to the A&E target that the Secretary of State has mentioned. What assessment has he made of the impact of the ongoing industrial dispute among the Agenda for Change cohort, and, of course, the junior doctors, on the delivery of the plan?

Steve Barclay: As a result of the fantastic work of Sir Jim Mackey and Professor Tim Briggs through the Getting It Right First Time programme, we have been making significant progress in respect of elective procedures. When it comes to urgent and emergency care, there are lessons coming out of the various strikes which we are keen to adopt, but this situation is also clearly having an impact on patients and the number of cancellations. As my hon. Friend well knows, we publish the figures.

We have been working constructively with the NHS Staff Council. Unison voted by a majority of 74% to support the deal, there will be further votes this week from other key trade unions, and there will be a decision from the staff council on 2 May. Obviously, that will be extremely important when it comes to addressing the concern highlighted by my hon. Friend.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): According to figures that I obtained recently from the House of Commons Library, in January 2023 54.4% of patients who were treated after an urgent referral received their first treatment within 62 days of that referral. The target is 85%. The figure for performance in January 2020, before covid, was 73.6%. Why has there been such a deterioration?

Steve Barclay: To be honest, I think the position is mixed. In certain areas we have seen significant improvements in performance: the faster diagnosis standard, for example, was hit for the first time this month.

Purdah prevents me from going into the details of the 78-week wait, but I expect to be able to update the House very soon on the progress that has been made. As the hon. Gentleman says, there are still challenges as a consequence of the pandemic, but we are seeing much more progress than the NHS in Wales, and it is also worth reminding the House that, through Barnett consequential, the Welsh NHS receives more funding than the NHS in England.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): This may surprise you, Mr Speaker, but I have found evidence that the Health Secretary has got something right. He recently hailed the power of local news outlets, and he was spot on. I have here a story from his local paper, exposing the shocking length of waits in A&E for those in a mental health crisis: 5.4 million hours across England in just one year. He is very welcome to have a look if he would like to. Given his admiration for local journalism, does he feel embarrassed for his Government's failings and will he apologise to all the people across the country who are stuck waiting in A&E?

Steve Barclay: There are two separate issues there: what we are doing for mental health in-patients and the point we just touched on about A&E. On mental health, it is good of the hon. Lady to give me the opportunity to remind the House of the significant increase in funding we are making to mental health. In the long-term plan, the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), made a major strategic choice to invest more in mental health—an extra £2.3 billion per year. The hon. Lady is right to highlight the need for more capacity for mental health in-patients—[*Interruption.*] She asked a question on what we are doing on mental health. I am able to tell her that we are spending far more and investing far more in it, but it seems that she does not want to hear that answer.

Health Inequalities

8. **Dame Caroline Dineneage** (Gosport) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle health inequalities experienced by people with learning disabilities and autistic people. [904607]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): Annual health checks for people with a learning disability are important in addressing the causes of avoidable deaths and avoidable morbidity and in improving health.

Dame Caroline Dineneage: It is eight years since the Transforming Care programme started, with a target of halving the number of people with a learning disability and autistic people in in-patient mental health settings by 2024, yet according to the Challenging Behaviour Foundation, the number of children in those settings has nearly doubled since then, the average length of stay is 5.4 years and, 12 years on from the Winterbourne View scandal, reports of appalling standards of care are still too frequent. Does the Minister agree that people with learning disabilities and autistic people deserve so much better?

Maria Caulfield: I thank my hon. Friend for her work in this place. Our priority is always to ensure that children and adults with a learning disability and autistic people receive high-quality care. More than 2,000 people—children and adults—are still waiting to be discharged from in-patient facilities but that is a reduction of 30% and we are making progress. I am meeting individual integrated care boards—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps the shadow Minister would like to listen to this. I am meeting individual ICBs to go through their patients who are waiting to be discharged to see what more support we can give to make that happen as quickly as possible.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Last year the Scottish Government announced £2 million-worth of funding and help for health boards to deliver health checks for all people with learning disabilities so that any health issues could be identified and treated as quickly as possible. What plans do the UK Government have to do similar across England?

Maria Caulfield: We also ensure that those eligible for safe and wellbeing reviews get one. Last year about 87% of those who were eligible did so.

NHS Dental Services

10. **Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the availability of NHS dental services. [904610]

22. **Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD):** What progress his Department has made on improving access to NHS dentist appointments. [904622]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): There are 6% more dentists doing NHS work than in 2010, and activity levels are going up. In March the number of patients seen over the past year was up by nearly a fifth on the year before. The initial reforms we have made to make NHS work more attractive are having positive effects but there is much more to do and we will be publishing a plan to improve access to dentistry.

Rachael Maskell: In York alone, practices are closing, turning private and handing back contracts. Units of dental activity are down 126,130 compared with four years ago and it can take five years to see a dentist. This is an unacceptable crisis after 13 years of complete failure. Will the Minister enable integrated care boards to have full flexibility to establish an under-18s NHS dental service in schools, along with a full elderly service and one for the most disadvantaged?

Neil O'Brien: We will look at all those things. We have introduced additional flexibilities, as the hon. Lady knows, and we are allowing dentists to do more to deliver 110% of their UDAs and bringing in minimum UDA values, but we are also interested in prevention and I would be happy to look particularly at what we can do for younger people.

Christine Jardine: Tooth care, like any other form of healthcare, should be universally accessible, but we know that we are facing a crisis across the UK, with one in five adults who could not get an appointment in the past 12 months carrying out dental work on themselves, or getting someone else to do it, which is quite horrifying.

The problem is not confined to one part of the UK. In Scotland, 80% of dentists are no longer accepting new adult or child patients. We have a crisis across the UK, so will the Minister commit to introducing a national programme and to speaking to the Scottish and Welsh Governments to address the shortage of NHS dentists for all of us?

Neil O'Brien: I am happy to work with the Scottish and Welsh Governments. We are, as I said, driving up levels of delivery, and we will be publishing a plan to take that further.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Like other colleagues, I have been approached by constituents who are struggling to find an NHS dentist because their previous dentist has either retired or converted to private practice. When the Minister presents his new dental plan, will it include a target to ensure registrations are available, as well as to increase the number of appointments?

Neil O'Brien: My hon. Friend is right, and I am particularly seized of the issue of access for new patients.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): My constituents in Dalton-in-Furness were dismayed to find out that their dentist has closed. This follows the closure of Bupa in Barrow and in Millom, and Avondale in Grange-over-Sands has handed back its NHS contracts. What was a bad situation has got very bad indeed. I am meeting the ICB next week to talk about what it might be able to do, but will the Minister agree to meet me to discuss what levers he can pull to improve dental access in Barrow and Furness?

Neil O'Brien: I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend, and we have already talked to some extent. The minimum UDA value that we introduced particularly helps rural and coastal areas of the kind he represents, and I am happy to talk further, and to go further, on all these things.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): As in the NHS, workforce is the biggest single issue. The Nuffield Trust has identified that, post-Brexit, dentists are among the key staff we are losing. On top of that, while Scotland and Wales have childhood dental health programmes, England does not. When will England have a national childhood dental health programme, and when will the contract in England be reformed to reward preventive work, rather than just dealing with emergencies?

Neil O'Brien: We passed legislation last month to make it easier for international dentists to come to the UK by reforming the General Dental Council to speed up the flow from abroad. The hon. Lady mentions an additional service that is available in Scotland. Of course, Scotland has 25% more funding per head than the rest of the UK, which is just one benefit of being in the UK, and it is one reason why people in Scotland voted to remain in the UK.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): The lack of NHS dentists is a major concern in north Staffordshire. Does the Minister agree that we should set up a dental school at Keele University, which already has one of the best medical schools in the country?

Neil O'Brien: We are looking at the dentist, hygienist and therapist workforces as part of the long-term NHS workforce plan. I can reveal that this is not the first time my hon. Friend has lobbied me on this idea, and I am sure he will continue to do so.

NHS Appointments

11. **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What progress his Department has made on improving access to NHS appointments. [904611]

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Will Quince): We are investing at least £1.5 billion to create an additional 50 million GP appointments by 2024. To improve access to hospital appointments we are giving patients choice about their care and offering alternative providers, with shorter waiting times, to long-waiters. We are also investing £2.3 billion in community diagnostic services, which will improve access to tests, checks and scans. One hundred community diagnostic centres are already open, and they have delivered more than 3.6 million additional tests.

Jamie Stone: If we have a power cut in north Scotland, people get a text message from SSE saying that engineers are coming out and that they will have power by, say, 3 o'clock. Missed NHS appointments are a waste of resources. I understand that some dental practices in England offer some sort of reminder service, but would it not be helpful if a leaf could be taken out of SSE's book so that everyone with an NHS appointment receives a text to remind them, "You have a test at 10 o'clock tomorrow," or possibly, "There is a big queue and there are delays, so your appointment has been changed to 4 o'clock"?

Will Quince: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise this issue. Better communication with patients was one of the five principles at the heart of our elective recovery plan, which was published in February. We recommend that all providers use appointment reminders, often through text messages. As he suggests, in some cases that has been shown to reduce "did not attends" by up to 80%. Providers have told us that they see better results when communication is two-way, for example, where patients can reply to cancel their own appointments. Alongside that, we also launched the My Planned Care website, so that patients can access information ahead of their planned appointment, and of course we are doing a lot more with the NHS app. This is just one of the ways in which we are putting patients in control of their own care.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): I am the father to two beautiful daughters, Becky and Eris, one of whom was conceived through in vitro fertilisation. Being a father is one of the best things that has ever happened to me, and I was very proud to see IVF services reinstated in Peterborough and Cambridgeshire, following a campaign that I supported and helped to lead. What plans does the Minister have to ensure that IVF services and appointments are routinely offered across the NHS, in line with National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidance?

Will Quince: I, too, have two daughters, so I recognise much of what my hon. Friend said—

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab) I do, too.

Will Quince: You do, too. Mine were not through IVF, but as a Back Bencher I also campaigned on IVF issues, because there was a postcode lottery on that around the country. That still exists to some extent and I would be happy to work with my hon. Friend to make sure that wherever people are in this country they can get IVF services.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The Conservatives have cut 2,000 GPs since 2015 and now too many patients cannot get an appointment when they need one: 3,000 patients are waiting a month to see a GP in Dover; 3,500 are doing so in Mansfield; 3,500 are doing so in North Lincolnshire; and 5,000 are waiting a month in Swindon. So why will the Government not adopt Labour's plan to double the number of medical school places, paid for by abolishing the non-dom tax status, so that patients have the doctors they need to get treated on time?

Will Quince: I recognise the pressures on the system, but Labour has spent the non-dom money 10 times over. We are taking real action on this issue: real-terms spending on general practice is up by more than a fifth since 2016; as I said, we are investing £1.5 billion to create an additional 50 million GP appointments; we have recruited more than 25,000 additional primary care staff; and there are 2,167 more doctors in general practice; and we have the highest number ever in training.

Cancer Treatment: Waiting Times

12. **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce the waiting time from receiving a cancer diagnosis to first treatment. [904612]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay): In February, the faster diagnosis standard was met for the first time. In addition, we are investing in additional screening, testing and tech in order to detect cancer much earlier.

Greg Smith: Recent data for the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West ICB shows that 42.6% of cancer patients are waiting more than 62 days for treatment. That will only get worse without a significant programme of upgrading radiotherapy equipment and ensuring that there is a skilled workforce of radiographers. So what steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that new, cutting-edge radiotherapy equipment is making it to the frontline, coupled with a fully staffed workforce to operate it and save those lives?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the interaction of workforce and capacity in equipment. That is why we have 810 more consultant training places over three years, and we have grants to enable more than 1,000 nurses to train, for example, in chemotherapy and 1,400 new recruits to the cancer diagnostic workforce. Obviously, that sits alongside the expansion in capacity, including both in our surgical hubs and our expanded diagnostic centres.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent had emergency surgery for a brain tumour, but this was after six months of going to the doctor repeatedly with problem headaches. Brain cancer causes 9% of cancer deaths but accounts for only 1% of cases. Sadly, my constituent is terminally ill, but he is in a position to explain his experiences. He has asked me to raise with the Secretary of State the issue of what work is being undertaken on genome sequencing, which could have a major impact on better treatment for brain cancers. It would be helpful if the Secretary of State not only answered this today but wrote to me in more detail on it.

Steve Barclay: The whole House will send their best wishes to the hon. Lady's constituent. She raises an important point about genomics, which is why we have invested in Genomics England and 100,000 babies are being screened—that is a key programme of work. The Minister for Health and Secondary Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) recently hosted a roundtable with key stakeholders on that, but I am happy to write to her with more detail, because the prevention and capability that is offered through screening is a great way of getting early treatment to people.

GP Appointments

13. **Sir David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): What progress his Department has made on increasing the number of GP appointments. [904613]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay): I think the question is about GPs and workforce capability, and that is why we are investing in more doctors. We have recruited over 5,000 more doctors, including an additional 2,000 doctors in primary care.

Sir David Evennett: An increasing number of my constituents are having difficulties obtaining appointments in GP surgeries. However, I was pleased to learn that the GP workforce in my constituency of Bexleyheath and Crayford has increased by an estimated 75% since September 2019. Will my right hon. Friend confirm what further steps he is taking to continue growing the workforce in general practice, which is so crucial to increasing the number of appointments available?

Steve Barclay: Now that I have found the right page in my notes I can be precise in telling my right hon. Friend that it is a 75.7% increase in his constituency, so he is absolutely right about that. Nationally, we have recruited an additional 25,262 full-time equivalent primary care professionals, so that is expanding the workforce capability in primary care. As my hon. Friend the Minister for Health and Secondary Care said a moment ago, it is part of our £1.5 billion investment in the workforce in primary care.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): As the House will know, this week is MS Awareness Week. Early diagnosis and treatment of MS are vital to delay disability progression and help those with the condition to manage it, yet, currently, 13,000 people have been waiting more than a year for a neurology appointment after GP referral. A recent study suggested that the UK comes a shameful 44th out of 45 European countries

for neurologists per head of population. When will the Government bring forward a strategy to attract, recruit and retain the neurology workforce?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Lady raises an important issue related to MS. I am happy to write to her with a more detailed answer about the capability and the plan. There is always a tendency within government to lurch to a strategy rather than to look at what is needed for immediate delivery. I will happily set out what steps we are taking now as part of our pandemic recovery in order to target the workforce within the constraints that she raises.

In-home Health and Social Care Services

14. **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve access to in-home health and social care services. [904614]

24. **Dame Angela Eagle** (Wallasey) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve access to in-home health and social care services. [904624]

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): I want people to live independently in their own homes for longer with the care that they need. We are investing half a billion pounds annually through the disabled facilities grant to pay for housing adaptations, and supporting the home care workforce through our record social care funding increase and workforce reforms. Our new and expanded NHS virtual wards give people hospital-level care in their own homes.

Mike Amesbury: My constituent, Ewan, recently lost his grandfather. His grandfather would have liked to have spent more time at home in his last few days, but he could not because of resources—the people were not there. What are the Government doing about that? There is a real recruitment and retention crisis in the social care workforce.

Helen Whately: The hon. Member makes an important point about people spending their last days of life where they would like to spend them, which, more often than not, means at home. That comes down to supporting end-of-life care—hospices play a really important role in providing that care in people's homes—and supporting the adult social care workforce. We are investing up to £7.5 billion in social care over the next two years and taking forward important reforms to support the adult social care workforce. As I mentioned a moment ago, we are increasing the amount of hospital-level care that people can get at home by expanding our virtual wards, which, by next winter, will mean that up to 50,000 people a month can be cared for to that level at home.

Dame Angela Eagle: Despite ministerial complacency, Age UK has pointed out that, nationally, there are currently 165,000 vacancies in social care, which is a 50% increase on last year. In the Wirral, vacancies run at 16%, which is despite the Wirral paying the real living wage. That means that only 26% of hospital patients are currently being discharged from Wirral University Teaching Hospital when they are actually ready to go. Does the Minister agree that the neglect and underfunding of social care by this Government is costing more money through wasted provision in hospitals, when social care, if it were properly provided, could give a much better experience for people who are ready to leave hospital?

Helen Whately: I thank the hon. Lady for giving me another opportunity to talk about what we are doing to support adult social care: an extra £7.5 billion was announced at the autumn statement to support adult social, an extra £700 million was spent on supporting discharges into social care over this winter, and we have already announced £600 million to support discharges to people's homes with the provision of social care over the coming year, because we recognise how important it is for people to get the care they need at home. The workforce are crucial to that, which is why we are taking forward our reforms to the adult social care workforce as announced a couple of weeks ago.

Topical Questions

T1. [904625] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay): The Government support the right to take industrial action within the law, but equally the law is there to protect patients and NHS staff alike. Following legal advice, NHS Employers and my Department are confident that the proposed strike action by the Royal College of Nursing goes beyond the mandate it secured from its members, which expires on 1 May at midnight. While NHS Employers has sought to resolve the issue through dialogue, the RCN's failure to amend its planned action has led NHS Employers to request my intervention. Even as we work to resolve those issues through dialogue, I can tell the House that I have regretfully provided notice of my intent to pursue legal action. None the less, I am hopeful that discussions can still be productive, especially those between the RCN and NHS England on patient safety, and that they will continue to be guided by the imperative to keep people who use the NHS safe.

Dr Huq: The right to choose sounds attractive, but when diabetic eye disease and glaucoma seriously threaten the sight of millions, the fact that any qualified provider can and does cherry-pick reversible cataract work leaves the NHS with astronomical bills and all the complex cases. Will the Secretary of State praise award-winning clinicians Christiana and Evie at Central Middlesex Hospital and visit to see for himself how effectively writing a blank cheque for private treatment is destabilising NHS budgets and jeopardising the NHS's ability to do award-winning research and to train junior doctors, who need routine work?

Steve Barclay: I am always happy to praise the brilliant work of clinicians up and down the NHS, who do a formidable job. Given the huge scale of the backlogs we face as a consequence of the pandemic, it is important that we not only use the full capacity available within the NHS, empowering patients through patient choice and technologies such as the NHS app to better enable that, but maximise the capacity in the independent sector.

T7. [904631] **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): Following the excellent television campaign on bowel cancer, which by the way got me to take a test, can I now ask that we have a similar campaign to talk about the importance of

pharmacists? If people consult pharmacists rather than their GPs on occasion, it will take the pressure off general practices.

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend makes a brilliant point, and that is something that we are committed to doing. There is a huge amount of expertise within the pharmacy network, which is why we are looking, through technology such as the NHS app, at how we can better enable people to get the right care from the right place at the right time. Quite often, that is not by seeing the GP, but it might be by seeing those in additional roles in primary care or going to a pharmacist who can offer the right services.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): A 13-year-old girl who has already waited more than a year for spinal surgery has seen her operation cancelled twice because of the Government's failure to negotiate an end to the junior doctors' strike. Why on earth is the Secretary of State still refusing to sit down and negotiate with junior doctors?

Steve Barclay: Like others in the House, my heart goes out to any 13-year-old girl in that situation. As the parent of a 12-year-old girl, I can only imagine how distressing it is to the family concerned to see that operation cancelled. That is why it is important that we have dialogue. The hon. Gentleman has said that the demands of the British Medical Association are unaffordable and unrealistic at 35%, as has the Leader of the Opposition. We have been clear on that, but the House saw that in our negotiation with the Agenda for Change staff unions we had meaningful, constructive engagement; that was how we reached an agreement with the NHS Staff Council, and we stand ready to have similar discussions with the junior doctors.

Wes Streeting: So why is the Secretary of State not sat down with them today? He says that he cannot negotiate because the BMA will not budge on 35%, but that is not true, is it? He says that the junior doctors have to drop their preconditions; they do not have any, do they? And he says that strike action will have to be called off before he can sit down; there are no strike days planned, are there? So is it not the case that he is quite happy to see hundreds of thousands of operations cancelled so that he can blame the junior doctors for the NHS waiting lists rather than 13 years of staggering Conservative incompetence?

Steve Barclay: It is slightly odd that the hon. Gentleman talks about 13 years when we are actually talking about a current industrial dispute. We have shown, through our negotiation with the NHS Staff Council, our willingness to engage and to reach a settlement. Indeed, the general secretary of the RCN recommended the deal from the AfC unions to her members. Unison—the union of which the hon. Gentleman is a member—voted for the deal by a margin of 74%. We stand ready to have engagement with the junior doctors, but 35% is not reasonable. He himself has said—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not need the Minister for Social Care, the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), shouting from the end of the Treasury Bench. Okay? I call Henry Smith.

T9. [904633] **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): What assessment has the Department made of antimicrobial resistance to superbugs originating in industrial farming?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): Successfully containing antimicrobial resistance requires co-ordinated action across all sectors. That is why the UK takes a “one health” national approach to AMR across humans, animals, food and the environment. Since 2014, the UK has reduced sales of veterinary antibiotics by 55% and has seen a decrease in antimicrobial resistance as a result.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): The *British Medical Journal* has warned that the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership trade deal will make it harder for the UK to regulate tobacco and alcohol or banned products such as those containing harmful pesticides. Given that no health impact assessment has been carried out, *The BMJ* recommends that one should be performed now. Will the Secretary of State commit to assessing the deal's threat to public health?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): We do not plan to debate any of our existing standards. We have some of the strongest standards for control anywhere in the world. We have no plans to get rid of any of those things.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Notwithstanding the work that the Government have done, the feedback that I am receiving from Suffolk-based NHS dentists is that there is still a very long waiting list for overseas dentists waiting to take the overseas registration examination, with more than 3,000 applicants and only 150 exams taking place each month. I urge my hon. Friend to leave no stone unturned in working with the General Dental Council to eliminate the waiting list as quickly as possible.

Neil O'Brien: We are leaving no stone unturned. Last month, we passed legislation enabling the GDC to increase the capacity of the ORE. We have also made it easier for overseas dentists to start working in the NHS: as of 1 April, no dentist will need to pay an application fee. We also want to radically reduce the time that dentists spend in performers list validation by experience, and we will set out further steps in our dentistry plan.

T2. [904626] **Kim Leadbeater** (Batley and Spen) (Lab): What is the Secretary of State doing to tackle the severe national shortage of desperately needed psychiatric intensive care beds, which means that people, including some of my constituents, have to travel hundreds of miles to see their loved ones?

Maria Caulfield: We are spending an additional £2.3 billion a year on mental health services, and we have recently announced £150 million for crisis community support, because we are trying to reduce the number of people being admitted in the first place by treating them at an earlier point in their mental health illness. That

will free up beds, but it will take time. Community crisis intervention is the way in which we want to make progress.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): Investors need certainty and the British people need access to more medicines. The growth cap in the voluntary pricing agreement for branded medicines between the pharmaceutical industry and Government makes the size of the medicines rebate unpredictable. Will the Minister remove the growth gap from the 2024 voluntary scheme for branded medicines pricing and access, to supercharge investment that is currently leaking to Germany and Ireland?

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Will Quince): I can certainly ensure the House that we are seeking a mutually beneficial voluntary scheme that supports patient outcomes, a strong life sciences industry and a financially sustainable NHS. We have been working directly with industry to understand the impact of changes to VPAS on investments into the UK life sciences sector, and we remain firmly committed to VPAS, which, it is important to say, has saved the NHS billions of pounds and saved millions of lives by supporting patients with life-threatening conditions and giving them rapid access to new medicines.

T3. [904627] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I was very grateful to get fantastic treatment for a detached retina at the brilliant Manchester Royal Eye Hospital, but 551 patients have lost their sight as a result of delayed eye doctor appointments since 2019, and the backlog for ophthalmology appointments is, at 630,000, the second largest in the country. The treatments are there, but what will the Government do to sort that problem out?

Steve Barclay: First, I very much welcome the good care that the hon. Gentleman received, and it is great to see him back in the Chamber. On the wider issue, that is why we have an elective recovery plan, in which we have applied a boost in capacity, particularly through the surgical hubs. We are looking at how we build greater resilience, especially in winter, when elective beds are often under pressure. We are also investing in areas such as eye treatment, and we are rolling out through Getting It Right First Time a programme of improvement in a range of areas, including that one.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): Provision for special educational needs and child and adolescent mental health services is one of the biggest issues in my inbox in Leicestershire, particularly in respect of delays in assessment and diagnosis. One of the Government's plans was to introduce school mental health support teams. The Health and Social Care Committee heard that the aim was that 35% of pupils should be covered by 2023. May we have an update on progress and on when we are likely to reach 100%?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I am happy to update the House, as we have already achieved 35% coverage. By the end of the month, we expect to have 399 operational mental health support teams, covering 3 million children and young people. We plan to go further, with over 500 such teams by spring 2024.

T4. [904628] **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Last week, I visited Leftwich Community Primary School in my constituency. The joint head teachers raised the desperate attempts that are made to secure NHS dentists for children and families in the community. Aside from publishing a plan, will Ministers intervene and make sure that that happens in Cheshire and Merseyside, and throughout the country?

Neil O'Brien: Absolutely. We have already taken action to increase the provision of dentistry, and that has begun to have an effect. Activity—the number of people seen—is up by a fifth over the past year as a result of the reforms that we have begun to make by reforming the old contract, but we must go further.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): One of my constituents, Bethany Whitehead, suffers from functional neurological disorder, which often presents with a number of debilitating symptoms. Bethany has often been left waiting two to three years before seeing a consultant. Will the Minister meet me to discuss this further?

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): My hon. Friend makes a really important point. I can say to her here and now that functional neurological disorder was previously regarded through a diagnosis of exclusion. It now has a rule-in diagnosis with available treatments, which is a major step forward in destigmatising the disorder. I am very happy to meet her to discuss this further.

T5. [904629] **Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): As chair of the all-party parliamentary health group, I have heard from UK patients who struggle to access GP appointments from chain GP practices. Many of those practices have very low ratios of GPs to patients, including, in one case, only two GPs registered for 30,000 patients. Will the Department meet the APPG to address these grave concerns?

Neil O'Brien: We have increased real-terms spending on general practice by over a fifth since 2016, and as a result there are now 10% more appointments happening every month. We are grateful to GPs for that. We have more doctors and clinicians, but we want to keep going, and I am happy to discuss this with anyone who has useful ideas to keep us powering forward.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): Yesterday, when the Prime Minister met business, the huge value of the NHS database was highlighted. Unfortunately, the previous occasions on which the NHS has tried to open its database have been unmitigated disasters. Will the Secretary of State give an undertaking to stick closely to the recommendations of the Goldacre report so that we can deliver the database while protecting the privacy of patients?

Steve Barclay: It is a huge opportunity. My right hon. Friend and I have discussed this matter outside the Chamber, and I met Ben Goldacre in the summer to discuss his fantastic work in the context of covid. It is absolutely right that, given the potential of artificial intelligence, there are huge opportunities in relation to health inequalities and allowing us to better target provision. I think my right hon. Friend would agree that we should do that through the prism of patient consent.

One thing that we are trying to build into the NHS app is the ability to better empower the patient to decide what they wish to sign up to and what they would like their data shared with.

T6. [904630] **Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): By 2040, cancer rates in the UK are expected to rise by a third. That is half a million new cases each year, so hundreds of thousands of lives literally depend on the Government implementing a long-term, fully funded, comprehensive plan for cancer. Will the Secretary of State recommit to a 10-year cancer plan?

Steve Barclay: We are committed to a major conditions paper, not least because many people with cancer have multiple conditions; that is why it is important that we look at these issues in the round. With the Minister for Social Care, I had a very useful roundtable with key stakeholders, including the cancer charities. The key issue is that as part of our work on cancer checks, over 320,000 more people are receiving treatment for cancer compared with last year—that is around fifth higher—and we are expanding our capacity through the diagnostic centres, the surgical hubs and the expansion of the workforce. All of that fits within the strategy we have through the major conditions paper.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): St Rocco's Hospice in Warrington provides invaluable palliative and end-of-life care for families. However, the charities that run hospices around the UK are finding it incredibly difficult to raise funds. Will the Minister give us an assurance that she is working very closely with the sector to ensure that those services continue to be provided?

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend makes a really important point about the very important work that hospices do in our communities, and I fully support hospices as a sector. The funding for hospices generally comes through the NHS and the local integrated care boards that commission the services they provide, as well as, of course, from their own fundraising efforts. I am speaking to NHS England about the support it provides to hospices, because I am very keen to make sure that they get the support that they need.

T8. [904632] **Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I have in my hands the draft business case for a satellite radiotherapy unit at the Westmorland General Hospital in Kendal. If it is approved and commissioned, residents in my community who have cancer will no longer have to travel two, three or four-hour round trips every day to get lifesaving treatment; they will be able to get it closer to home. Will Ministers meet me and the clinical specialists who helped draft the business case, so that we can make it come to fruition?

Helen Whately: Yes, I am very happy to meet the hon. Member.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Building on the novel approach to clinical trials that was so successful for the covid-19 vaccines, what more is the Department doing to capture that success and the willingness of volunteers to come forward, as well as to streamline processes across participating bodies for clinical trials of future medicines?

Will Quince: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. Over 12,000 more participants a month are recruited into clinical trials than before the pandemic, but we recognise that there is much more to do in order to be internationally competitive, including around regulation and speed of approval. I am pleased to say that in the coming weeks, Lord O'Shaughnessy will publish his independent review into UK clinical trials, and I very much look forward to receiving his recommendations.

T10. [904634] **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): When we had a shortage of doctors, the last Labour Government established the Hull York Medical School. We now have a shortage of dentists, so it is time for a Hull York dental school. This proposal has cross-party support in the Humber, so I wonder whether a delegation of MPs could meet the Minister to discuss taking the initiative forward.

Neil O'Brien: I am very happy to meet the right hon. Lady as we work towards the workforce plan and the dental plan.

Mr Speaker: I call Mark Fletcher to ask the final question.

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): The Minister is aware that BUPA recently closed the dental practice in Bolsover, leaving a severe shortage of NHS dentistry in the constituency. I met the ICB yesterday to discuss the various options for the constituency, but will the Minister commit to meeting me and the ICB to talk through those options and see what we can do to maintain NHS dentistry in Bolsover?

Neil O'Brien: I have already met my hon. Friend, but I am very happy to meet him and his ICB to make sure that we commission the services that are so needed locally.

BILL PRESENTED**DIGITAL MARKETS, COMPETITION AND
CONSUMERS BILL**

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Kemi Badenoch, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Michelle Donelan, Secretary Lucy Frazer, Kevin Hollinrake, Paul Scully and Julia Lopez, presented a Bill to provide for the regulation of competition in digital markets; to amend the Competition Act 1998 and the Enterprise Act 2002 and to make other provision about competition law; to make provision relating to the protection of consumer rights and to confer further such rights; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 294) with explanatory notes (Bill 294-EN).

Universal Jurisdiction (Extension)

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

12.38 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to provide that offences of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes may be tried in the United Kingdom regardless of the nationality or residence of the offender; and for connected purposes.

The Universal Jurisdiction (Extension) Bill would tighten existing legislation on how we bring to justice those responsible for the world's most heinous crimes. The Bill would allow legal systems across the UK to do that, irrespective of where the crimes were committed, regardless of the nationality or location of the perpetrators or victims, and without having to consider whether the accused person or the victim had any specific connection to the UK. In short, the Universal Jurisdiction (Extension) Bill is about saying to the world's worst criminals that there is no hiding place and there will be no immunity.

Under international law, states are required to investigate and, if necessary, prosecute certain crimes under the principle of universal jurisdiction. It is the international community's way of recognising that there are crimes so grave that we all have an inherent responsibility and collective interest to ensure that they are prosecuted. The Bill seeks to help the UK meet its international responsibilities by amending the International Criminal Court Act 2001. Although that Act gives courts jurisdiction over war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity, it is still woefully deficient in providing what we would want from legislation claiming to operate universal jurisdiction.

The main problem with the 2001 Act is that even with the most heinous crimes, if they were committed outside the UK, they can be prosecuted here only if the accused person is a UK national, a UK resident or subject to UK service jurisdiction. While some may say that the UK does have universal jurisdiction when it comes to such crimes, the reality is that what we have in the UK could best be described as a system of extraterritorial jurisdiction. That is what the Bill seeks to remedy, so that we instead have a real and meaningful system of universal jurisdiction for those crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. That is important, because given what is happening in the world right now, this is a live and pressing issue, whether in Ukraine, Myanmar, Xinjiang, Tigray or many, many other places.

Many people are working right now on how the UK should change its definition of universal jurisdiction. I put on record my thanks to Dr Ewelina Ochab of the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute for her invaluable assistance in putting the Bill together. I also thank the Clooney Foundation for Justice, which has done an enormous amount of work on this topic in recent months, and which will in the next couple of months release its own report on universal jurisdiction in the United Kingdom.

I understand that among that report's key recommendations will be that the UK Government amend section 51(2)(b) of the International Criminal Court Act 2001 to remove the requirement that for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, the

[Brendan O'Hara]

crime needs to have been committed either in the UK or, if committed outside the UK, by a UK national or resident for our courts to have jurisdiction. The report will argue instead that the UK should provide jurisdiction over those international crimes committed anywhere in the world, even when that offence bears no relation to the UK.

As the Clooney Foundation for Justice report will set out, our courts already have universal jurisdiction when it comes to torture and certain other war crimes, which can be prosecuted regardless of the defendant's nationality. There is no convincing explanation for the distinction that is drawn between the law on torture and those other international crimes. One consequence of the loophole might well be that Russian generals with blood on their hands could still travel to the UK, go shopping in Knightsbridge, undergo medical treatment and dine out in London's best restaurants without facing the risk of arrest for the most serious and heinous crimes in the world. The foundation argues that that must change, and I wholeheartedly agree.

In this changing world, it is becoming increasingly clear that the UK's position on universal jurisdiction is simply not fit for purpose. That is not just because we operate this extraterritorial jurisdiction, but because under current law, proceedings for international crimes cannot be brought without the consent of the Attorney General. Ultimately that means that decisions to prosecute these crimes will be a political decision. Consequently, the UK cannot possibly play as meaningful a part in ensuring justice and accountability as it should. That may go some way to explaining why, to this day, British courts have not prosecuted anyone for their involvement in genocide, despite the fact that we have suspected perpetrators residing in the UK from both the Rwandan and the Yazidi genocides.

Even by the Government's own assessment, almost 1,000 British nationals travelled to Syria and Iraq to join Daesh. They were all complicit in the horrific atrocities, the killings, the rapes, the sexual enslavement of Yazidi women and girls, and much more—so much more, indeed, that this House unanimously declared in April 2016 that Daesh atrocities did indeed constitute a genocide. The UK Government also estimate that 400 British Daesh fighters are now back in the UK, yet only 32 of those returnees have been convicted for terror-related offences, or less than 10% of the returnees. Not one—not a single—Daesh fighter has stood trial in the UK for the rape and sexual enslavement of Yazidi

women and children. Not one of them has been charged with torture or the forced recruitment of young boys into the ranks of Daesh fighters. Not one of them has been held to account for the mass graves that are still being uncovered in Sinjar, and not one of them has been asked to explain the fate of the 2,700 Yazidi women and girls who are still unaccounted for. They have all gotten away with genocide.

But it does not have to be this way. Many of our friends and allies have changed their law to meet the changing situation. In Germany, the law is unambiguous, saying that universal jurisdiction will apply to all criminal offences against international law. That means, regardless of where an offence was committed and whether it involves a German citizen, an accused person can be tried before a German criminal court. It has been this determination to pursue universal jurisdiction—genuine universal jurisdiction—that has resulted in the first ever prosecutions and convictions for members of Daesh for genocide.

In January 2023, President Biden signed into law the Justice for Victims of War Crimes Act, which greatly expands the scope of individuals who can face prosecution for US war crimes. That Act will assist the Department of Justice in prosecuting alleged war criminals who are found in the United States, regardless of where they committed a crime or the nationality of either the perpetrator or the victim. The law was given extra impetus in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, where there is now a growing body of evidence of war crimes being perpetrated by Putin's army.

Despite many warm words, the harsh truth is that, if UK domestic law is not strengthened, we will be unable to play a full part in bringing some of the world's worst criminals to justice. That is why we need proper, universal jurisdiction, and that is why we also need to remove that extra political hurdle of seeking the permission or consent of the Attorney General before we can prosecute for genocide. This Universal Jurisdiction (Extension) Bill aims to address these issues, and help the UK play a full and appropriate role in ensuring justice, accountability and the upholding of international law.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Brendan O'Hara, Drew Hendry, Caroline Lucas, Liz Saville Roberts, Kirsty Blackman, Claire Hanna, Patrick Grady, Jim Shannon, Ben Lake, Patricia Gibson and Stewart Malcolm McDonald present the Bill.

Brendan O'Hara accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 296).

Opposition Day

14TH ALLOTTED DAY

Water Quality: Sewage Discharge

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

I call the shadow Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

12.49 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to set a target for the reduction of sewage discharges, to provide for financial penalties in relation to sewage discharges and breaches of monitoring requirements, and to carry out an impact assessment of sewage discharges; and makes provision as set out in this Order:

(1) On Tuesday 2 May 2023:

- (a) Standing Order No. 14(1) (which provides that government business shall have precedence at every sitting save as provided in that Order) shall not apply;
- (b) any proceedings governed by this Order may be proceeded with until any hour, though opposed, and shall not be interrupted;
- (c) the Speaker may not propose the question on the previous question, and may not put any question under Standing Order No. 36 (Closure of debate) or Standing Order No. 163 (Motion to sit in private);
- (d) at 6.00pm, the Speaker shall interrupt any business prior to the business governed by this Order and call the Member for Oldham West and Royton or another Member on his behalf to move the motion that the Water Quality (Sewage Discharge) Bill be now read a second time as if it were an order of the House;
- (e) in respect of that Bill, notices of Amendments, new clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.
- (f) any proceedings interrupted or superseded by this Order may be resumed or (as the case may be) entered upon and proceeded with after the moment of interruption.

(2) The provisions of paragraphs (3) to (18) of this Order shall apply to and in connection with the proceedings on the Water Quality (Sewage Discharge) Bill in the present Session of Parliament.

Timetable for the Bill on Tuesday 2 May 2023

(3) (a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be taken at the sitting on Tuesday 2 May 2023 in accordance with this Order.

- (b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) at 8.00pm.
- (c) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) at 10.00pm.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put on Tuesday 2 May 2023

(4) When the Bill has been read a second time: (a) it shall, notwithstanding Standing Order No. 63 (committal of Bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee

of the whole House without any Question being put; (b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(5) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chairman shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(6) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (3), the Chairman or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply—

- (a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;
- (b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;
- (c) the Question on any amendment, new clause or new schedule selected by The Chairman or Speaker for separate decision;
- (d) the Question on any amendment moved or motion made by a designated Member;
- (e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded; and shall not put any other Questions, other than the Question on any motion described in paragraph (15) of this Order.

(7) On a Motion made for a new clause or a new Schedule, the Chairman or Speaker shall put only the Question that the clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

Consideration of Lords Amendments and Messages on a subsequent day

(8) If on any future sitting day any message on the Bill (other than a message that the House of Lords agrees with the Bill without amendment or agrees with any message from this House) is expected from the House of Lords, this House shall not adjourn until that message has been received and any proceedings under paragraph (9) have been concluded.

(9) On any day on which such a message is received, if a designated Member indicates to the Speaker an intention to proceed to consider that message—

- (a) notwithstanding Standing Order No. 14(1) any Lords Amendments to the Bill or any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly;
- (b) proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments or on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under subparagraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed;
- (c) the Speaker may not propose the question on the previous question, and may not put any question under Standing Order No. 36 (Closure of debate) or Standing Order No. 163 (Motion to sit in private) in the course of those proceedings.

(10) Paragraphs (2) to (7) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme Orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments to a conclusion as if:

- (a) any reference to a Minister of the Crown were a reference to a designated Member;
- (b) after paragraph (4)(a) there is inserted—
“(aa) the question on any amendment or motion selected by the Speaker for separate decision;”.

(11) Paragraphs (2) to (5) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme Orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings on consideration of a Lords Message to a conclusion as if any reference to a Minister of the Crown were a reference to a designated Member.

Reasons Committee

(12) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme Orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order as if any reference to a Minister of the Crown were a reference to a designated Member.

(13) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings on the Bill to which this Order applies.

(14) (a) No Motion shall be made, except by a designated Member, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a Motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(15) (a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings on the Bill to which this Order applies except by a designated Member.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(16) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(17) No private business may be considered at any sitting to which the provisions of this Order apply.

(18) (a) The start of any debate under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) to be held on a day on which proceedings to which this Order applies are to take place shall be postponed until the conclusion of any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(b) Standing Order 15 In line 4 (1) (Exempted business) shall apply in respect of any such debate.

(19) In this Order, “a designated Member” means—

(a) the Member for Oldham West and Royton; and

(b) any other Member acting on behalf of the Member for Oldham West and Royton.

(20) This Order shall be a Standing Order of the House.

The motion would allow for parliamentary time on Tuesday 2 May to progress Labour’s Bill, the Water Quality (Sewage Discharge) Bill, which would finally see an end to the Tory sewage scandal. The reason we are here today is that the country we love, and the quality of life for millions of working people, is being treated with utter contempt: dumped on with raw human sewage; dumped on on an industrial scale; dumped on with at least 1.5 million sewage dumps last year alone; and dumped on for a total of 11 million running hours. That is a sewage dump every two and a half minutes. Just in the course of this debate, 70 sewage dumps will take place in the country, in the places where people have invested everything they have, where they have put down their roots and where they have invested the most precious of things—their families and shared futures. Those sewage dumps are going into the seas where people swim, the canals alongside which people take their dogs for a walk and the very beaches where our children build sandcastles.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con) *rose*—

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con) *rose*—

Jim McMahon: I will make some progress and take some interventions later—*[Interruption.]* Hang on; your moment will come.

It goes to our leisure and beauty spots. Businesses rely on tourists coming with confidence.

It is clear that the Tories either do not know, or do not care about the human impact of the Tory sewage scandal. This affects every stretch of our coastline across the country, and it shows the contempt that the Tories have for our seaside towns, from Hartlepool to Hastings, from Bournemouth to Falmouth, from Camborne to Blackpool, and everywhere in between. Beyond the coast, our national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty, which are home to our stunning lakes, and our rivers, the arteries of our nation, are being sullied by the Tory sewage scandal.

Alun Cairns *rose*—

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. May I say to the hon. Lady and the right hon. Gentleman that, yes, the hon. Member has to give way, but you cannot permanently be stood there until somebody—*[Interruption.]* You do not need to give me any indications. I am telling you what the rules are and the rules will be applied. Secretary of State.

Jim McMahon: Thank you, Mr Speaker—we’ve 12 months yet. I will take interventions once I have made progress on this section. Hon. Members should not worry; their opportunity to defend the last 13 years in government will come—they should not worry too much about that.

At its heart, this speaks to whether families should have the right to live a decent and fulfilled life. People look to our seas, lakes and rivers for quality of life. They are the very places where people live, work and holiday together, and where families create memories, forge bonds and strengthen relationships by enjoying the beauty that our country has to offer. More than just the daily grind of work, it is about who we are and it is those moments together that make life worth living. But the truth is that the Tories are turning our green land into an open sewer.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, but I would like him to outline when he or the Labour party realised that sewage was being put into rivers and seas. When was the Labour party made aware of that originally?

Jim McMahon: I welcome that intervention. I would also welcome an explanation to the hon. Lady’s constituents as to why there have been 200 sewage incidents in her own backyard. That is why her constituents send her here—to ensure that their interests are put right—*[Interruption.]* I will come on to Labour’s record, but I warn Government Members that it may not paint the last 13 years in a good light.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Jim McMahon: I will make some progress.

This is an environmental hazard, a health hazard and an economic hazard. The full scale of the billions of pounds that the Tory sewage scandal is costing our businesses and local economies is still not fully known. Why? Because the Government will not undertake an economic assessment of the impact of sewage dumping. What do they have to hide? *[Interruption.]* Members will like this bit—hang on. While the Secretary of State has been on taxpayer-funded jollies to Brazil, Canada, Egypt, France, Japan, Panama and the US, as shadow Environment Secretary, I have travelled to every corner of the country to hear first-hand about the impact of the Tory sewage scandal. While she has been in duty free, I have been here on duty—that's the difference—*[Interruption.]* There's more, hold on. You're in for a bumpy ride. The next three hours will not be like first class, I can tell you that much.

I have met businesses that have been forced to pull down the shutters when sewage alerts drive people away from beaches. I have met people in Hastings who are suffering the effects of having contracted hepatitis and Weil's disease just because they encountered sewage in the open waters. I have met community groups such as that self-organising, fundraising and monitoring the water quality in the River Kent. They are saying to the Government that enough is enough. I heard the same things in Oxford and when I met Surfers Against Sewage in Cornwall.

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The hon. Member said that he came to visit Hastings and spoke to people—he never informed me of his visit to Hastings.

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order, but I would say to the hon. Lady that, if somebody has been to her constituency, it is absolutely correct that Members should give notice to the MP whose constituency they are visiting. I do not care which side of the House Members sit on. You must do the right thing and let a Member know that you are entering their constituency.

Jim McMahon: I am very happy to look into that point. As a matter of course, we always ensure when visiting the constituents of Conservative MPs that as a matter of respect we inform the local MP. I would love nothing more than for a Conservative MP to attend those visits and explain their voting record to their constituents. I know that Helena Dollimore, the Labour and Co-operative candidate, was very much made aware, so I will follow that up and ensure, if it did happen, that it does not happen again.

Earlier this week, I met environmental groups from across the country to hear about the impact that the Tory sewage scandal is having on their communities. They stand proud of their communities, but they are equally angry, and they are right to be angry. Only this weekend, we celebrated St George's Day and spoke about what makes England so special, and what makes it a green and pleasant land. For example, the brilliant Lake Windermere, England largest lake, formed 13,000 years ago from the melting ice, is a world heritage site and attracts 16 million visitors every year. What William Wordsworth once described as:

“A universe of Nature's fairest forms”

is now dying at the hands of this complicit Government. One member from the Save Windermere campaign told us that, due to the constant pollution, a whole five-mile stretch of the lake has been turned bright green because of excessive pollutants being dumped in it. Even the glorious Lake Windermere is not off bounds.

The fantastic coastline of Cornwall draws in millions of visitors and is a magnet for surfers—surfers who face the prospect of becoming ill simply by going out in the water. There are campaigners for the River Ilkley, in self-styled God's own country, Yorkshire.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Jim McMahon: I will take an intervention shortly from the Opposition Benches.

Mr Speaker, do you know that raw human sewage is even being discharged moments away from these very Houses of Parliament? Members should think about that when they go to vote. There is no place exempt from the Tory sewage scandal—and what a metaphor for the last 13 years of a Tory Government.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. My constituency is named after the River Weaver, which is at the heart of our community. We have the River Mersey as well. Some 19,000 hours' worth of raw sewage has been discharged into those rivers. I thank the shadow Secretary of State for giving the whole House the opportunity to stand up for our local rivers, waterways and beaches. I encourage Members from across the House to join us in voting for the motion today.

Jim McMahon: That is exactly what this debate is about: MPs who care about the places they represent standing up for what is right, instead of making excuses for 13 failed years in government. That is exactly why Members are sent to this House, and others could take note.

What we have seen is that there is no respect for our country, there is no respect for our values, there is no respect for our history and there is no respect for our future. What is more, there is no respect for the working people who make this country what it is.

What was the Secretary of State's response when this issue was first raised? First, she told Parliament that meeting water companies was not her priority, passing the buck to her junior Minister; then she broke the Government's own legal deadline for publishing water quality targets; and then she announced, repeatedly, that she would kick the can down the road on cleaning up our waterways. Since then, we have had three panic-stricken announcements of the Secretary of State's so-called plan, each one nothing new but a copy and paste of what went before. We know the Tories do not have a plan. At best, they have a recycled press release. That is the difference. I give way to the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): I do not think anyone would argue that we do not need to invest more in better water quality. More parts of the country need to see schemes such as the new water treatment works in Scarborough and the 4 million litre storm water tank, also in Scarborough. What we need to debate is timescale and affordability. Does the hon.

[Sir Robert Goodwill]

Member think that it is slightly ironic that, when even the most modest prediction is that his proposals would put £1,000 on the average water bill, the second debate this afternoon is on the cost of living increases?

Jim McMahon: Honestly, I am staggered. I say that with respect to the Chair of the EFRA Committee. Our figures are based on the Government's figures, and I am happy to put them in the House of Commons Library. DEFRA's own figures put a cost on Labour's plan and, let me tell him, the lowest estimate is 10% of what has been taken out in dividends. Those are not our figures; they are the Government's own figures. If the Environment Secretary has not read her own assessment of ending the Tory sewage scandal, it will be in the Library at the end of the debate; Members can read it for themselves. This is her day job, right? She is meant to understand the data her Department produces and form a plan behind that. I am sorry that my expectations were obviously too high. [Interruption.] Members will enjoy the next bit.

Let us not forget the Environment Secretary's first spell in DEFRA. In her three years as water Minister, she slashed the Environment Agency's enforcement budget. Its ability to tackle pollution at source was cut by a third, resources to hold water companies to account were snatched away and there was literally the opening of the floodgates that allowed sewage dumping to take place. What have been the consequences? There has been a doubling of sewage discharges: a total of 321 years' worth of sewage dumping, all on her watch and straight to her door. She said that getting a grip of the sewage scandal was not a priority, but something for other people to sort out. What she really meant was that it was not politically advisable, because her own record spoke for itself. I have a simple question: how can she defend the interests of the country when so implicated in destroying it? The public are not stupid. They see this issue for exactly what it is: the Tory sewage scandal.

Kelly Tolhurst: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim McMahon: I have already given way once. Let me make some progress.

Last week, Labour published analysis of Environment Agency and Top of the Poops data which showed that in 2022, Tory Ministers—this is the Cabinet, the highest seat in government—allowed 7,500 days' worth of raw human sewage to be dumped in their constituencies. The data showed that there is a sewage dump taking place every 22 minutes in their own backyard. That Tory Cabinet Ministers are willing to allow that to happen to their own constituents really speaks volumes. In Suffolk Coastal, a constituency that may be familiar to the Environment Secretary, there were 426 sewage dumps last year. In the Chancellor's constituency, there were 242. In the Prime Minister's Richmond, Yorks constituency—proof that this goes all the way to the top—there were 3,500 sewage dumps.

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Will he acknowledge that the only reason he is able to reel off those statistics is because the Conservative Government have ensured that we now have 91% monitoring, soon to be 100%, across the country? Will he also acknowledge that that

has only happened under a Conservative Government and that the last Labour Government did absolutely nothing?

Jim McMahon: I am not one to offer advice to those on the Government Benches, but I will just say this to eager Back Benchers bobbing for their Whips: they might want to check their constituency's data before getting up to defend the Government's record. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Mr Seely, you are trying to catch my eye, but you will not do it by chuntering from that position.

Jim McMahon: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The hon. Lady will know that her own constituency has had nearly 2,000 sewage dumps. If she wants to defend that record to her constituents, then so be it—fine. But if she does not want to remind her constituents, I can guarantee this: the Labour candidate will. That is what this debate is about and why Members are so exercised, let us be honest. Are Members exercised because our rivers, lakes and seas are being dumped on, or are they exercised because they have now realised that they might have to face the consequences of that dumping? That is what the excitement is about.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jim McMahon: I am going to make some progress.

The Government will blame everybody: the Victorians, devolved Administrations, home drainage, housebuilders, people flushing items down the loo. Now, it is true that this issue has to be faced on multiple fronts, but there is one common theme that has run throughout the Secretary of State's period in office. What is it? They never take responsibility; it is always somebody else's fault; it is never at the door of the Government. Let me be clear: the levers of power were always there to be pulled. The truth is that the Government did not even lift a finger to try and that is why we are in this situation today.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Ind): One hundred years ago in St Helens we had chemical factories, coalmines, glassworks and no environmental regulations, but with 835 sanctioned spills in 2022, pollution in our rivers and waterways is arguably worse now than it was then. Does my hon. Friend share the frustrations of the volunteers who look after the Sankey canal and valley, and engage in activities such as litter picks, that no matter how much rubbish they get from the towpath, there is 10 times more going into the canal itself?

Jim McMahon: That is a really good point. Many people think that this must be an issue that affects our seas and our national parks, but it goes to every community. For those who live in an urban community, the stream or canal network near their home is being dumped on. For many communities that is all they have. That is their bridge to nature, and it is being treated with such disrespect by the Government in a way that cannot carry on.

I want to return to the issue of levers of power, because quite a lot of what I hear is that the scale of the challenge is overwhelming and that to face it is far too great a mountain to climb. Economic regulation of the water industry in both England and in Wales has always been controlled by the Tories here for the last 13 years,

treating England and Wales as an open sewer. That lever could have been pulled to improve water performance, holding water companies to account and resourcing the work needed to combat sewage pollution in England. *[Interruption.]* I hear the Environment Secretary chuntering; hopefully, she will address that.

To be absolutely clear about where power sits in our democracy and where Government responsibility sits when it comes to water: first, economic regulation—the levers of power, the purse strings—are not devolved at all.

Alun Cairns: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance. The shadow Secretary of State may have inadvertently misled the House. He said moments ago that water and environmental policy were reserved, but they are devolved. I suspect that he might be embarrassed that the Welsh Government have not acted—

Mr Speaker: Order. You will leave—

Alun Cairns: He is seeking to obfuscate responsibility—

Mr Speaker: Order. I have told you before, Mr Cairns, that when I stand up, I expect you to sit down. When I start to speak, I do not expect you to carry on speaking. Mr Cairns, you have been pushing your luck for quite a few weeks, and I am serious. I hope that in future you will take notice, because we will make sure that you do. I do not want to get to that point, but you are pushing me towards it. I am not responsible for what the shadow Secretary of State says. He has heard your point—although it was not a point of order—and I will leave it to him.

Jim McMahon: I am not sure whether Parliament can do some sort of induction for Conservative Members on how Parliament works and where power sits, but the House of Commons Library is very good at providing briefings for MPs. To be clear, the economic regulator Ofwat reports solely to the Environment Secretary for the UK. That is a matter of fact. It is not devolved; it is for the UK. The economic levers of power have allowed £72 billion of shareholder dividends to go out the door on one side, while England and Wales have been turned into an open sewer on the other. That goes right to the door of the Secretary of State.

I credit the Welsh Labour Government for their record of leading on nature and the environment. Like me, they say that whether in England or in Wales, every part of the land that we care about and love, where working people have a right to a decent life, should be kept in good check and with the respect that it deserves.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Jim McMahon: I will make some progress.

Conservative MPs should see this as a second chance, which everyone deserves. Let us take our mind back to the first chance, which was the passage of the Environment Act 2021, and an amendment that Labour backed that would have introduced a legal obligation to bring down sewage dumping progressively. It was blocked by Conservative MPs, who voted against it. It fell at the first test, but we believe in second chances. Today provides that second chance to right that wrong and to get behind Labour's plan to clean up the Tory sewage scandal.

Let me come to Labour's record, because the Conservatives would have us believe that the scale of dumping was inevitable, that there is nothing we can do about it, and that there is no alternative or somehow it has always been terrible. That is not what the evidence says. The last Labour Government had a proud record of delivering improvements in water quality. Shortly after the Labour party left office, the Environment Agency—in the Secretary of State's own Department—reported that our rivers were cleaner than at any time since before the industrial revolution. In fact, in 2002, the then Environment Minister—the former Member for Oldham West and Royton, as it happens—celebrated how clean the water was when he took to it in Blackpool, with cameras looking on, to celebrate the proud moment that it met bathing water quality status. I would not think that the Environment Secretary would have the confidence to go swimming on the shores of Blackpool today, since over the past year there have been 22 incidents—62 hours—of raw human sewage being dumped in those waters, straight into the Irish sea.

We have shown that Labour will clean up the Tory sewage scandal—we have done it before, and we can do it again. In the absence of any leadership from the Government, Labour is stepping up. Today, there is finally something worth getting behind, after waiting 13 lost years—a whole generation of opportunity taken away.

Let me address cost. We are in the middle of a Tory cost of living crisis. Households are being hammered, and at every angle it seems that things are getting worse, not better. People see that when they go to the supermarket for their shop—again, a risible failing by the Secretary of State responsible for food, who does not think it is her job to have a roundtable with the food industry—and straight through to energy bills and mortgages. People are feeling the pinch. In their water bills, people are already paying for a service. Sewage treatment is itemised in every one of our bills but is not being delivered. Instead, the Tories are allowing water companies to cut corners and to dump sewage untreated.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): Will the shadow Secretary of State give way?

Jim McMahon: Let me make this point, because it ties in with following the money and tracking back to the impact. The storm overflow data, which water companies themselves provide to the Government, tells us that not a single one of the dumping incidents from last year was a result of exceptional circumstances. They were not down to rainfall or storms—the water companies and the Government say so. It is about a lack of treatment and investment. *[Interruption.]* I hope that the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes) can learn to be quiet without the attention. That is basic good sense.

We need to address the issue of who pays. We believe that the polluter should pay. At the same time, water companies have walked away with £72 billion in dividends, and water bosses have enjoyed payments and bonuses of millions of pounds, even after sewage dumping had been identified. The Bill is about fixing those loopholes that allow poor practice and corner cutting, to ensure that the Government and the water companies together are acting in the public interest. It is not right that working people are paying for the privilege of having raw human sewage dumped in their communities.

Paul Holmes *rose*—

Jim McMahon: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, as he has been persistent.

Paul Holmes: I note that the shadow Secretary of State's paragraph on the Labour record was very short—perhaps because under the Labour Government 7% of sewage discharges were monitored, whereas now that is 91%, with an ambition of 100% through the legislation that the Secretary of State has laid out. Why can the shadow Secretary of State not stand at the Dispatch Box and welcome that, and accept that his party did nothing about this issue in its time in government?

Jim McMahon: I am not sure that was worth waiting for. The hon. Gentleman was so persistent that I thought a gem would come to advance the debate, but the House was left wanting, yet again. I am proud of Labour's record. We went from industrial pollution affecting our rivers and canals to the cleanest water since before the industrial revolution. That progress and legacy should have been built on, but they have been trashed. We have gone backwards, not forwards.

We need to change the culture in water companies and demand change, by setting down legally binding targets and enforcing straightforward penalties for failure. The Bill protects bill payers in law—no ifs, not buts. The cost must and will be borne by water companies and their shareholders, protected in the Bill in black and white. That is the basis of our motion, and it is what Members on all sides of the House will vote for later—not a fabricated version of reality that does not hold up to the evidence; no more jam tomorrow, asking people to wait until 2050 at the earliest to see an end to the sewage scandal; in black and white, a plan finally to end the scandal.

Let me outline what the Bill does, before I close and allow other Members to speak. It will deliver mandatory monitoring on all sewage outlets and a standing charge on water companies that fail.

Kelly Tolhurst: Done.

Jim McMahon: One minute. That will mean that where a discharge station is not in place or is not working, the water companies will pay a standing charge, assuming that sewage is being discharged. Automatic fines for discharges will end the idea that people have to go through a costly and protracted investigation and prosecution to hold water companies to account. Water companies will pay on day one, the second that sewage is discharged. Legally binding targets will end the sewage discharge scandal by 2030. We will give power to the regulators and require them to properly enforce the rules. Critically, and in black and white, we will ensure that the plan is funded by eroding shareholders' dividends, not putting further pressure on householders by adding to customers' bills.

Let me be clear: any Tory abstentions or any votes against the motion or the current Bill are yet another green light to continue the Tory sewage scandal.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): The hon. Gentleman has made the fatal error of thinking that we are supporting the water companies, when we are holding them to account. That is exactly why we have threatened them with unlimited fines; exactly why Ofwat has passed new

rules to restrict dividend payments; and exactly why we now have the most stringent measures on water companies in Europe. What did the Labour party do, because it did not hold water companies to account?

Jim McMahon: The hon. Gentleman is definitely currying favour with the Conservative Whips Office, and I give him credit for energetically reading out the Whips' top lines—[*Interruption.*]

The hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) said earlier that her office was not informed about our visit to her constituency, when we met our fantastic candidate, Helena Dollimore. I have been handed a copy of an email that proves not only that her office was informed of the visit, but that that email was acknowledged by her office.

Mr Speaker: Does the hon. Member wish to respond to that point?

Sally-Ann Hart *indicated dissent.*

Mr Speaker: Okay. Carry on.

Jim McMahon: I will come straight to the point: had the Conservative Government, in their 13 years in office, treated this issue with the importance that is needed and dealt with the water companies—

Anthony Mangnall: Will the hon. Gentleman answer my question now?

Jim McMahon: The hon. Gentleman can answer this question for his constituents: over the last 13 years, why has an average of £1.8 billion every year been taken in shareholder dividends and not invested in water infrastructure? That is a record. [*Interruption.*] I do not care what the Whips Office has briefed; I care about the evidence. That is what every debate in the House should be based on. I respectfully ask him to go away and test the evidence, rather than reading the top line.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Jim McMahon: A lot of Members have put in to speak in the debate and they have a right to be heard, so I will bring my remarks to a close.

This plan is the first step in Labour's reform of the water industry and will work towards building a better Britain. After 13 years, the Tories have run out of road, run out of ideas and run out of time. Labour is ambitious for Britain and for working people. That starts with treating the country, working people and local businesses with the respect that they deserve.

1.23 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from

“an impact assessment of sewage discharges;”

to the end of the Question.

The public are rightly disgusted by the excessive sewage discharges from storm overflows, and so am I, my colleagues on the Government Benches and hon.

Members across the House. So are this Government. That is why we have taken more action than any other Government on the issue.

We created our storm overflow discharge plan, with an impact assessment showing that it will require the largest ever investment by the water industry, up to £56 billion. Last month we set out our new comprehensive, integrated plan for water. That will deliver a clean and plentiful supply of water for people, businesses and nature, building on the significant investments and progress already made in cleaning up our waters since 2010.

Nearly three in four beaches are rated excellent for bathing, which is up from just half in 2010, when Labour left power. We have taken on the micro and single-use plastics that are a plague for marine life; we are supporting the super-sewer in London, which is taking over 10 years to construct; and there is consistent action, right across the country, on cleaning up our waters. That is why we are seeing much-loved species, such as seahorses, otters and seals, returning to our rivers and seas.

By requiring water companies to start monitoring, we unveiled the scourge of sewage. It was a Conservative Minister, Richard Benyon, who ordered that. By the end of this year, not by 2030, all combined sewer overflows will have monitors. Informed by monitoring, we are now in the situation where the water companies are under active criminal and civil investigation by the Environment Agency and by Ofwat, which is the largest investigation ever. That is why I move the amendment in my name and that of the Prime Minister, because this Government have already taken action.

With regard to this motion, we already have a target for a reduction in sewage discharges, which we will put into law; we have already consulted to remove caps on financial penalties; and we have already undertaken an assessment of sewage discharges. However, unlike the Opposition, we have a credible, costed plan to stop the scourge of sewage.

Today we have already heard a barrage of blame and finger pointing, but we have not heard a credible, costed plan to tackle the issue. I am used to the personal attacks, the diatribes and the cheap shots, but I can tell hon. Members that Labour's plan is not cheap. My parents lived in Frodsham for some time, so I am very conscious of the River Weaver, and I grew up in Liverpool, so I am very conscious of the River Mersey, which has got cleaner and cleaner over time thanks to ongoing continued investment.

Frankly, we should be having a grown-up debate about the issue. A lot of the plan set out by the shadow Secretary of State is pointless because it is already being done. We were talking about food, and I guess the hon. Gentleman has taken up growing magic mushrooms: the Opposition did not publish the data, they were not monitoring it, they kept people in the dark and they fed them BS for all the time they were in government.

Stephen Crabb: Is my right hon. Friend slightly surprised by the tone that has been struck by the Opposition? Does she agree that they need to show a bit more humility, because if they were serious about these proposals being their official party policy, would we not expect to see some evidence of that being implemented in a part

of the country where they are in power—namely, Wales—where there are no targets and no credible plan for tackling the issue?

Dr Coffey: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The shadow Secretary of State is ambitious to take my job in the future, but I am confident that the Conservatives will win the next election, partly because we are used to cleaning up this sort of rubbish when Labour leaves office.

I gently say to the shadow Secretary of State that Ofwat is a non-ministerial department and the Welsh Government provide a strategic policy statement to Ofwat for matters in Wales. It is a devolved matter. The hon. Gentleman is dragging the Welsh Government into the debate today, but he should be aware that in 2022 Wales had, on average, 38 spills per outflow, whereas in England it was down to 22 spills. Tackling the issue is not straightforward, but Wales is not doing well. I am not going to blame the Welsh Government out loud, but I am conscious that they would be better following us and having a credible, costed plan, instead of looking away from Westminster.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The complacency that the Secretary of State is displaying is frankly shocking. Not one English river is classed as being in a healthy condition, none meet good chemical standards and few meet good ecological standards. The Conservatives have been in power for 13 years. That is a record of failure. In addition, dividends now average £1.6 billion a year, which is money going out of the system altogether. Why will she not accept that privatisation has been a complete failure, put water back into public hands and make sure the investment goes where it is needed?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Lady should be aware that during the last decade we put in place legislation that made it tougher to meet ecological status. That includes taking on the monitoring of certain chemicals, which is not done by the Welsh or Scottish Governments. That is why we will continue to work on this issue in a specific way. We are leaning into the issue.

I genuinely wish that Labour had started to sort out the issues when in office. I am not saying that the Labour Government did completely nothing, but they were certainly not clear with the public about what was going on. In 2010, we knew there was no money left after Labour's damage to the public purse. Indeed, the former Labour Chief Secretary to the Treasury was honest enough to tell us that in his own writing. What we did not know was quite how much mess was left behind for a Conservative Government to clean up yet again, which is what we set about doing.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that since the privatisation that has just been criticised, investment has doubled to £160 billion?

Dr Coffey: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right. We are talking about sources of financing. Do the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) and Opposition Members want to see fewer hospitals and schools being built, or less going towards all the other ways in which we are spending taxpayers' money?

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I listened to what the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) had to say, but under the last Labour Government the pumping of raw sewage into our waterways was unregulated, unmonitored and completely unrestricted. Since 2010, this Government have increased the monitoring of outflows, which will be at almost 100% next year. They have imposed £150 million in punitive fines on water companies. They have sponsored investment of more than £56 billion, over decades, into the water network. They are the first Government to tackle the issue for many decades. Does the Secretary of State agree that the Labour spokesman was talking poo?

Dr Coffey: I think that is a polite way of describing what we heard.

Sewage overflows are not new. They are the result of Victorian plumbing infrastructure combining waste water and surface water pipes, and they were designed to act as a safety valve so that the impact of heavy rainfall would not lead to sewage backing up into people's homes. That was more than 100 years ago; since privatisation, we have seen much-needed investment into our leaking water network. More than 30% of pipes, if not close to 40%, have been replaced in that time.

It was in Labour's time in government, back in 2003, that the EU took the Government to court in relation to sewage discharges from overflows. In 2009, it was a Labour Government who introduced operator self-monitoring, allowing water companies to mark their own homework. After the minimal progress under Labour, it was a Conservative Minister who recognised the problem and recognised that we needed an objective means of measuring discharges. That is why water companies were instructed in 2013 to monitor when and for how long their storm overflows operated. That data is published online; thanks to our Environment Act, it will now need to be provided in near-real time. As I have said, all storm overflows will be monitored by the end of this year.

It is the monitoring and opening up of information that has exposed the scale of the issue. It is why we have already had successful criminal prosecutions, it is why we have an unprecedented criminal investigation under way right now, and frankly it is why we are seeing a Labour party that is desperate to make up for its failures in office.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Would my right hon. Friend be kind enough to clarify to the House that in most cases, and certainly in my constituency, storm overflows are over 95% rainwater? Certainly, at no point is raw sewage being dumped on our beautiful beaches.

Dr Coffey: I agree. Facts are our friends in these matters, and it is important that we continue to ensure that our constituents are well informed.

I agree with the shadow Secretary of State that there is a massive difference between a press release and a plan. We have already set out our plans and are delivering them: the environmental improvement plan; our integrated plan for water, which is tackling all forms of water pollution from transport and metal mines to forever chemicals and farming; and our storm overflow reduction plan, which I am pleased to announce today that we are

planning to enshrine further in law. Through the Environment Act 2021, we will legislate for a clear target on storm overflow reduction in line with our plan. That clear, credible and costed legally binding target will add to our transparent and determined approach to solving the issue, while being careful with consumer bills.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know, having grown up in Liverpool, how beautiful the coastal constituency of Wirral West is. The Rivers Trust found that a sewer storm overflow in Caldy spilled 75 times in 2022, for a total of more than 1,700 hours, discharging directly into the Dee estuary. It is a very beautiful part of the world, where people go to enjoy the beach, let their children play, enjoy water sports and so forth. It is also very important environmentally—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady is meant to be making an intervention, not a speech. It has to be brief.

Dr Coffey: I share with the hon. Lady a love for that part of the north-west. I grew up there, and I used to cycle down to the River Mersey regularly on the Otterspool prom. I was not quite so much a visitor to the other side, apart from when I was visiting family elsewhere.

It is thanks to the openness of this Government in getting the monitoring done and publishing it that the scale of the scourge of sewage has been unveiled. The hon. Lady should welcome that. She should also welcome the active plans that we have been undertaking, with investment, so that even more action will be under way to reduce that sewage, if not eliminate it.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): The constituency that I have the privilege of representing has the River Itchen and the River Hamble. Last week I met Southern Water, which now has an investment plan, purely because of the 91% of monitoring that this Government have put in place. Would that infrastructural investment have been able to go ahead if just 7% of our rivers were being monitored?

Dr Coffey: Quite clearly, the answer is no. There would not have been the scrutiny that there is today, nor would there have been the investigations that are already under way. The Hamble is a very precious sailing river that goes out into the Solent, so it is important that people can have confidence. That is why our plan has investment behind it so that we can continue to ensure that our waters are cleaner than ever before.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Dr Coffey: No, I will try to make a bit of progress.

After the many press releases, it is good finally to see a little bit of detail about what the Labour party would do about sewage, but to some extent it is already being done. Frankly, today feels like another gimmick, if not a sham, from the Labour party.

I understand that the shadow Secretary of State's Bill, which has been hastily prepared—I believe it was published last night—is pulling Wales into this. We have already somewhat covered that issue, but based on his logic, I am not surprised that he is embarrassed about

the Welsh record. Of the longest sewage discharges in Britain in 2022, the top two were in Wales. Three of the top five constituencies for hours of sewage discharged were in Wales, according to Top of the Poops. In 2022, the average number of spills per outflow in England was 23; in Wales it was 38. As I say, I am not seeking to blame the Welsh Government, but—speaking candidly—facts are our friends. Instead of fudge and obfuscation, we will keep going with our credible plans, because we are determined to clean up our waters.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree with Law Wales, which states that

“Senedd Cymru generally has legislative competence in relation to all aspects of water quality, water resources and water industry”?

Contrary to what the shadow Secretary of State said, this is the responsibility of the Welsh Government.

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, as is the person he quoted. This is a matter that is dealt with by the Welsh Government, who issue the same strategic policy statement to Ofwat that my Department delivers. Indeed, a price review is under way right now.

Alun Cairns: When my right hon. Friend introduced legislation, it was clearly aimed at England, but did she give the Welsh Government the option of extending those tighter restrictions to Wales to ensure a tighter and more uniform structure across both nations?

Dr Coffey: Understandably, the Environment Act principally addresses England. It is important that we respect devolution to the Welsh Government, who have it in their power to act and who do different things. I do not think they shy away from the fact that this is a difficult challenge. I commend them on the many beautiful beaches in Wales, which I have visited many times, including in my right hon. Friend’s constituency and in that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb). However, this is not straightforward and there is no overnight fix. Credible plans are needed, so this Government are right to be making progress.

Sir Robert Goodwill: Further to the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes), does the Secretary of State agree that Welsh Water is a not-for-profit organisation, so the shadow Secretary of State’s argument that dividends should be used to pay for improvements does not wash in Wales?

Dr Coffey: Well said.

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): East Devon residents are rightly disgusted by sewage in our waters, and so am I; I am glad that the Secretary of State agrees. I live by the sea in Sidmouth, and I have repeatedly called on South West Water to clean up its act and our water. It has been fined millions thanks to this Government, and it should never reward failure for bonuses. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if it does not clean up its act, it must face the full force of the law, including unlimited penalties?

Dr Coffey: I absolutely agree. We exercised the necessary foresight in drawing up the legislation that became the Environment Act. We listened to the regulators, because we wanted to understand what was happening. Ofwat asked us to give it powers that would allow it to link

dividend payments to performance, including environmental performance, and that is being done. We have completed the consultation, and we now need to review it, but we intend to ensure that the Environment Agency can impose unlimited penalties, which I think will be welcomed by my hon. Friend’s bill payers.

Matt Western: I have been listening intently to what the Secretary of State has had to say, and I admire her confidence, but that confidence is not shared by my constituents and many other members of the public when it comes to the condition of our rivers. May I invite her to come to my constituency and look at the River Avon? Perhaps she will don a cozzie, do a Gummer, and get in the water and see just how terrible it is.

Dr Coffey: I think I will be in Stratford-on-Avon in a few weeks, and I may well be able to find time to visit the hon. Gentleman. I have a lot of rivers, and of course the sea, in my own constituency, Suffolk Coastal, which stretches from the River Orwell in the south to the Hundred river in the very north, with many rivers in between. I am very conscious of the importance of this issue to our constituents, and I am proud of the fact that beaches in Felixstowe have had excellent bathing water status pretty much since the qualification arose. I am also aware that the Denes beach in Southwold lost that status, which is why, as a local Member of Parliament, I intervened, along with Anglian Water, to clean up the treatment works in Southwold. I am delighted to say that the beach is now back to a three-star rating. There is a case for ensuring that we have targeted activity, but overall, what I expect as Secretary of State is to receive the plans for every storm overflow that I have requested from the water companies by June.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): My father is a civil and structural engineer and I have engaged with him regularly on the subject of sewage pollution, but I think that one of his more familial aphorisms is particularly important: “To fix a problem, you have to know about it.” Does my right hon. Friend agree that the fact that we now have the 90-odd per cent. knowledge of what is going on that allows us to prioritise plans is one of the Government’s key achievements?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is wise in her years, and she is absolutely right. It is a case of trying to ensure that we have the necessary information. I repeat that the process of getting the information out there began a decade ago, and the Environment Act allows us to ensure that near-real-time information is available as well.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I listened closely to the speech from the shadow Secretary of State, which I have to say was pretty poor—and given that I have listened to quite a few Labour speeches in my time, that takes some beating. Can the Secretary of State shed any light on why a Labour party that hates privatised utilities would allow the self-monitoring of water quality unless it was intended to hide a problem?

Dr Coffey: What can I say? When the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) ran for the leadership of the Labour party, he suggested that there should be common ownership, which I would describe as nationalisation. We are seeing

[Dr Coffey]

yet another flip-flop from the Labour party when its members realise that it is one thing to get into power and another thing actually being in it.

We need to continue with what we are trying to do to cut sewage discharges. We have heard about the target of 90% by 2030, and it is a headline-catching figure, but there has been no credible, costed plan in any previous media scrutiny or, indeed, today. That is why I suggest that the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton is detached from reality and trying to pull a fast one with the public.

Our storm overflows discharge reduction plan outlines the largest infrastructure programme in water company history, and will deliver the toughest ever crackdown on sewage spills, transforming our Victorian sewerage infrastructure. The plan sets targets that will be underpinned by legally binding changes to company permits, designed to front-load action in particularly important areas such as bathing waters. To ensure that these ambitious targets are realised, I have also asked the water industry to produce a detailed action plan for every single storm overflow in England by June.

A critical element in the development of these targets and our plan was an assessment of technical deliverability and cost, which is why the Government published a full impact assessment and an additional report on the costs of eliminating discharges from storm overflows. If the shadow Secretary of State wants to deliver a 90% reduction by 2030, it would have been helpful for him to inform the House how he plans to practically deliver £56 billion worth of capital projects in the next seven years, let alone separate enough combined pipes to go almost two and a half times around the earth in those seven years, or indeed build the equivalent of 40,000 Olympic-size swimming pools of additional storage capacity. What will the Labour party's proposals really mean for customers' bills? Even the hon. Gentleman is not naive enough to think that there is a magic money tree to pay for this.

Anthony Mangnall: The Secretary of State has just mentioned the important issue of water companies producing plans. Can she reassure me, and all the people of the south-west and south Devon in particular, that those plans will have to be enforced, and that we will be keeping a very close eye on their implementation?

Dr Coffey: I can indeed give my hon. Friend that assurance. We will continue to ensure that the licence fees and the costs of permits cover inspections, and we will consider further what additional funding changes might be needed for that purpose.

Perhaps Labour intended to introduce a sewage tax or something similar, as proposed by the Liberal Democrats, although it would take such a tax some 500 years to fund the level of investment required. That is, dare I say, another classic Liberal Democrat policy—all soundbite but detached from reality. Meanwhile, we have an ambitious, credible and realistic plan.

As for mandatory sewage outlet monitoring, the Government are already doing that; 91% is already in place, and the rest will be completed by the end of the year. The Environment Agency will also ensure that water companies carry out monitoring in line with their

permit conditions. The monitoring requirements introduced by the Government have been instrumental in enabling the regulators to undertake the largest criminal and civil investigations of sewage discharges in water company history, covering more than 2,200 treatment works. Through powers in our landmark Environment Act, we are also making it a legal requirement for the near real time data on discharges to be available to the public, and the consultation on those regulations is live now. We are going even further by placing a duty directly on water companies to monitor the water quality impact upstream and downstream of all their assets—not just storm overflows but wastewater treatment works as well.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): This is not just the responsibility of the water companies, because it is not just water assets that discharge into our rivers. Within a short section of the River Tame in Greater Manchester there are three water assets, but there are also Johnson brook and Wilson brook. Johnson brook regularly discharges raw sewage into the Tame because of a misconnected sewer somewhere along the reaches of that brook, and Wilson brook regularly discharges chemicals into the Tame because of industrial processes. The Environment Agency's actions are appalling. What more is the Secretary of State doing—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We cannot have these long interventions, because too many Members want to speak. It is simply not fair.

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman has raised a very specific constituency matter. I am sure that if he were to write to me or to the Water Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), we could follow it up.

I am conscious that a great many Members have applied to speak today, but I want to make a few more points clear. I have been advised by my officials that issuing automatic penalties could actually limit subsequent liability for more serious enforcement action and higher penalties when an investigation found that an incident was more severe than was initially thought. When a pollution incident occurs, the severity of the incident and the degree of culpability need to be properly investigated. It is through such proper investigation that the Environment Agency can determine the most appropriate response, including criminal prosecution for the most serious incidents.

I am sure that the policy is well intentioned, but it strongly risks making enforcement weaker and potentially letting the most serious polluters off the hook. Water companies must be liable for any illegal activity: polluters must pay. That is why, since 2015, the Environment Agency has carried out more than 50 prosecutions, securing court fines of over £140 million, including the record-breaking fine of £90 million handed to Southern Water. Again, we are going further to ensure that water companies face substantial penalties, which are easier to deploy than going through the courts. We are consulting on reforms to the civil penalties that the Environment Agency can issue to make the process quicker and easier. As I have said, the Government's preferred option is to remove the cap on penalties entirely, which would pave the way for unlimited penalties for water companies that break the rules.

There is a great deal more that I could have said, but we listened to the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton for more than half an hour, and it is important for other Members to be able to contribute to the debate.

It is the role of Ofwat to scrutinise proposals from the water companies to make sure that customers get good value for money. We will try to carry out other activities such as trying to reduce the cost of these new projects overall, but I also want to flag up that we will continue to ensure that we deliver our integrated plan for water. It is a blueprint for a truly national effort to meet the stretching targets that we set through the Environment Act 2021, and it includes actions to tackle every source of pollution, including sewage discharge and pollution from agriculture, plastics, road run-off, chemicals and pesticides. The plan is underpinned by significant investment. Its scale and deliverability, plus the detail of it, mean that it will go further and faster than anything we have ever done before, and it is certainly going further and faster than most developed nations have ever gone before.

In summary: Labour wants monitoring; we have already delivered it. Labour wants fines; we have delivered record fines. Labour wants larger penalties; we are making them unlimited. Labour says that it wants stronger sanctions, but it would in effect weaken them. Labour wants a plan; we have already published one. Ours is fully costed and credible. Labour says that its plans will not impact household bills, but it cannot say how much they will cost. It was a Labour Government who were taken to court by the European Union for allowing the discharge of sewage, and 13 years later in Wales, where Labour is actually in government, they are discharging sewage almost twice as often as in England. That is not a plan; it is an uncoded political game and a recipe for tripling the average water bill. I encourage the House to support our amendment today, to stop the false attacks and to focus on delivering cleaner water. That is something that all our constituents want.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): It is obvious that an awful lot of people want to speak this afternoon, so we will start with a time limit of four minutes—I am sorry, not five minutes—which will quickly go down to three minutes, so I advise most people sitting in the Chamber to look at their notes and cut them in half.

Sally-Ann Hart: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I would like to apologise to the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon). I understand he emailed my office on 7 September last year and received a response.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for setting the record straight with that point of order, and I see that the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton has acknowledged her apology.

Jim McMahon *indicated assent*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Let us continue with the debate.

1.52 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): In September 2021, I stood in this place and called for an investigation into the activities of Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water. I asked for Ofwat and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to investigate its practices. I did this because it has responsibility for parts of the Wirral, Cheshire, Gloucestershire and Herefordshire. My request was based on an appalling record that has seen communities having their water cut off for days and their rivers being polluted with sewage. I am sad to report not only that these calls have been met with a deafening silence but that things have got worse. The Rivers Garw, Tawe, Teifi, Usk and Taff and even the River Wye are six of the most polluted rivers in UK. What they all have in common is that they are the responsibility of Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water. Last month, research found that raw sewage was discharged in Islwyn for more than 9,179 hours in 1,850 sewage dumping events. Natural Resources Wales has said that there will be no salmon in Welsh rivers within 20 years.

What is Dŵr Cymru's response to this record of shame? It is to reward its chief executive, Peter Perry, with a bonus of £232,000, on top of his basic salary of £332,000. This is a company serving some of the most deprived and isolated communities in the country. When I wrote to him to query his pay, he was proud to tell me that he had worked his way up from being an apprentice. He said:

“My pay is not determined by me. It is not influenced by me.”

He went on to claim that he was pretty much the lowest paid of his peers in England and Wales. Try telling that to the customers who are struggling to pay the second highest bills in the country. Just over the border, Severn Trent Water has some of the lowest bills. The worst thing is that it is impossible to switch suppliers. Mr Perry is not an isolated case. In 2020-21, three executive directors were paid bonuses of £931,000. At the same time, raw sewage was dumped into Welsh rivers 100,000 times. It all adds up to the same thing: Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water is profiting from pollution.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Can the hon. Gentleman explain to the House why the recourse that we are expecting from the Labour Welsh Government on storm overflows is so late?

Chris Evans: I think the hon. Gentleman will have to refer that question to the Welsh Government, but I thank him for that little bit of mischief and for the extra minute he has just given me.

It is my sincere hope that, if this motion passes, we will see the end of these unwarranted, unfair bonuses while imposing uncapped fines on the companies that are polluting our beautiful rivers. For me, this goes much deeper than simple profiteering. I grew up along the River Taff, and as I looked into the river, I would see the colours of the rainbow. To my young mind, it seemed that rainbows lived in the river. But they were not rainbows; they were the thick film of oil polluting our rivers. That was over 30 years ago. Since then, our Welsh valleys have become green and beautiful, with our newly emerging tourism industry. It is not uncommon to see people fishing, kayaking and wild swimming, but all those activities are at risk. It is amazing, when we have spent so long cleaning up our rivers, that all that work is being undone by the work of one company.

[Chris Evans]

Although I have to hand it to Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water: it is good at crisis communications. According to the chief executive, in the past year the company has spent over £800,000 on advertising and public affairs. When I spoke out about this 18 months ago, the public affairs officer sent an email defending the company's practices within minutes of me sitting down. It is certainly busy sending endless emails to politicians.

Alun Cairns: I understand and share many of the concerns the hon. Gentleman has highlighted, but does he recognise that the legislative responsibility for restrictions in this area lies with the Welsh Government? Does he share my concern and disappointment that the restrictions in Wales are nowhere near as tight as those that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is proposing to introduce in England? Does he agree that we should introduce a common system adopting the high standards that she talked about?

Chris Evans: The right hon. Gentleman is probably enjoying my speech because he thinks that this is the responsibility of the Welsh Government, but it goes much deeper than that. This pollution affects us all; it affects our children, it affects everybody. We have to find a way to work together on this. I am not going to stand back and allow Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water to carry on like this just because it hides behind the fact that it is a non-profit. Something needs to be done and it needs to be done now. That means working in partnership with this Government and the Welsh Government. I will support any measures to work together on this because it goes much deeper than what we are doing at the moment.

Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water likes to send out tweets highlighting schemes to save customers money. It also runs television adverts with helpful tips for saving money, under the banner "For Wales", giving the impression that it is somehow linked to the Welsh Government. To top off my frustration with the company, I recently had a request from the polling company Ipsos MORI, as many of us do. The companies that fund the surveys remain anonymous, but it did not take much to deduce who it was when I was asked such questions as "How would you rate Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water's performance?" and "Do you know about its plans to end pollution in Wales?" It did not take a genius to work out who had funded that survey. When I complained, I was told by the public affairs department, with an apology, that I should not have been contacted because of my views on the company. The money spent on this type of work would be better used to improve its service rather than its reputation.

As I have said, it is difficult to speak out on this matter but I genuinely believe that things need to be done now. Mr Perry told a Senedd Committee that sewage discharges

"are not where we want to be".

People are paying an average of £499 a year for their bills and they desperately need a return on those bills. I hope that by supporting this motion today we can give them some sort of recompense for what they are going through.

1.59 pm

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans). I welcome what he said about trying to work cross-party to solve this problem. That is what I have been doing since this Parliament began. I do not want to dwell on the private Member's Bill that I introduced over three years ago, but it is surprising that it has taken the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) three years to come up with his own private Member's Bill. Having read it, it seems to me that he has not read the Environment Act 2021, introduced by this Government a year and a half ago. The Water Quality (Sewage Discharge) Bill is one of the weakest documents I have ever seen, and it was clearly concocted and manufactured purely for the purposes of this debate. As he said in his opening speech, the Bill was introduced to benefit Labour candidates in the next parliamentary election, whenever it comes, and in next month's local elections. The political opportunism is shameful.

However, in the spirit of seeking to focus my remarks on something useful, I will dissect some of the specific errors in the Water Quality (Sewage Discharge) Bill. First, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, clause 1 talks about water quality monitoring requirements. Two years ago, the Environmental Audit Committee's "Water quality in rivers" report specifically called for the improved monitoring of our waterways. We have heard that Lord Benyon, the Conservative rivers Minister at the time, introduced monitoring as a result, and we are nearly at 100%. We called for upstream and downstream monitoring of the impact of discharges into rivers, which is precisely what was included in the Environment Act. Clause 1 of the Bill seeks to accelerate the measure to bring it into effect from 1 October, which is completely unrealistic. We have not yet agreed the technical specifications to be able to test water for the four parameters, so there is no supply chain in place to do that. Hopeless.

Clause 2 of the Bill talks about adverse impacts and seeks to accelerate and define the progressive reduction of sewage discharges, which are also covered by the Environment Act, to try to prevent 90% of such discharges by 2030. The Secretary of State has said there is no clarity on how much that would cost, but we know that it could cost hundreds of billions of pounds, adding £1,000 to customers' bills and diverting the entire construction industry to fix the problem. Over the next seven years, which hospitals and schools would not be built as a result of Labour's proposal?

Anthony Mangnall: My right hon. Friend is making an extraordinarily important point about finding a balance between attracting investment and ensuring that work is delivered to address the problem. Can we go further in encouraging water companies to keep that balance in order?

Philip Dunne: I will come on to that in a moment, but my hon. Friend makes the valid point that there is not enough dividend income for the water companies to pay for the billions of pounds in the storm overflows discharge reduction plan, as the Labour party fancifully suggests. The companies cannot pass the whole bill on to customers, so they have to be able to go to the markets, which are actively looking to invest in green projects of this nature. The money is there, but it will only be delivered through the private sector.

Clause 3 of the Bill talks about financial penalties. Labour is calling for penalties for the use of storm overflows. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, this is a question of degree. We already have penalties, and it is the Conservatives who introduced the water restoration fund, on which we are currently consulting, so that the proceeds of any fines resulting from the 2,000 permit breaches that are currently being investigated by Ofwat and the Environment Agency, as a result of this Government's direction, will make the polluter pay. That is happening. The Labour motion suggests that it could happen instantly, but that would put the entire water system in disarray. This is another completely unrealistic proposition.

The hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton is calling on the Government to produce a discharge strategy, so he clearly has not read the storm overflows discharge reduction plan that the Government published a year ago. He also calls for a legal obligation to consult Welsh Ministers. Frankly, we have just heard about the appalling performance of Welsh Water under this Welsh Government. For further clarity, the 83,000 spills in Wales represent almost 22% of the total number of spillages across England and Wales. The last time I looked, Wales represented about 5% of the UK population, not 22%. That is a hopeless example, and the last thing we should do is take advice from the Welsh Government.

2.4 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Parliament debated sewerage in the summer of 1858, during the great stink. In every respect, it beggars belief that, after 165 years of technological advancement and social progress, we are still debating sewage pollution in our waterways, but we are because something is going terribly wrong. The status quo is not working, and it is time to consign sewage pollution to history.

Water is not just another commodity. It is a vital public resource, and we should manage it for the public good. I accept that the task of reforming the water industry for the public good is huge, and we have to work together to get it right. Water is essential but, let us be honest, filth is found in nearly every UK waterway. In Barnsley, for example, Yorkshire Water pumped raw sewage into our rivers and streams for 13,228 hours in 2022, and that figure is almost certainly an underestimate because monitoring budgets have been cut. It has not helped that, due to ever tighter budgets, the Environment Agency's role in monitoring and, where necessary, prosecuting illegal dumping in our waterways has been curbed. Since 2010, environmental protection funding has dropped by 80% and enforcement funding by 40%. Prosecutions fell from almost 800 in 2007-08 to just 17 in 2020-21.

Although England's main water companies were cautioned or fined hundreds of times for sewage dumping between 2010 and 2021, the total fines amounted to just 0.7% of their profits. Water companies paid £57 billion in dividends between privatisation in 1991 and 2019. Combined with the servicing of debt, those shareholder payouts have added around £93 to average yearly bills. This is not some operational issue that can be solved by small tweaks to the failing system; it is a systemic problem that requires transformative action and an approach that sees water as a basic necessity rather than as a commodity.

The current arrangements for regulating the water industry mean that the regulator is simply not equipped to tackle the challenges we face. We need a reformed regulator that is focused on protecting the environment and the public. It should have a social and environmental mission, and a responsibility for helping to push through a co-ordinated plan to address climate change, pollution and infrastructure upgrades. Crucially, a reformed regulator should bring together stakeholders, including local and regional government, community groups, businesses and experts. Campaigners should also be included, not least Feargal Sharkey, who has worked tirelessly to clean up our waterways.

Regulating water for the public good means safe, sewage-free waterways and affordable bills that provide value for money to consumers. Cleaning up our water has always been a political choice, and it is in the Government's gift if they think it is time for fundamental change. I hope they do, but I strongly support Labour's motion because it is past time that we stopped managing our public resources for private profit. Instead, we should support them for the public good.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): After the next speaker, the time limit will go down to three minutes.

2.8 pm

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): This is an important issue, and I agree with the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) that all parties in this place should work to improve what is a very difficult situation for our constituents and the country.

My constituency has eight chalk streams, and I have been campaigning for many years to improve their quality, often with support from Labour Members such as Martin Salter—he is a keen angler—and cross-party members of the all-party parliamentary group on chalk streams, which I helped to set up.

I was shocked when two of my substantial chalk streams, the Beane and the Mimram, ran dry in 2007. I took the Labour Minister to see them, and he was shocked by their condition. The World Wide Fund for Nature joined me and others in starting a campaign, "Rivers on the Edge", to reduce the huge amount of water being abstracted from these streams. We were successful in that campaign, although by then the Government had changed. It then became clear that not only were these poor streams being abstracted, but they faced pollution, problems with agricultural practice next to them, with nitrates going into them, and all sorts of other problems, including sewage overflow.

I pay tribute to Charles Rangeley-Wilson, who has been involved in all the campaigns, including those against pollution and soil erosion, and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), whose Bill I supported; we both rebelled slightly against the Government on one occasion over that issue. Charles chaired Catchment Based Approach in producing a restoration strategy for chalk streams, which is a good document that the Government support. The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) came to its launch by the River Mimram

[Sir Oliver Heald]

in my constituency, and it sets out a national chalk streams strategy. Although many of its recommendations are not about the problem of sewage overflows, it does cover that.

The Government have taken powers in the Environment Act 2021 and the Agriculture Act 2020 that would enable a catchment-based approach to tackling the range of issues involved in river quality. The water plan, which has been released recently, shows where the investment would be, with fines imposed and money reinvested in improving water quality. One of the main recommendations was to have some sort of protection and priority status for chalk streams. I know that the Secretary of State is concentrating on water generally, but Lord Trenchard has tabled an amendment to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill and I wonder whether she would be prepared to consider it.

We know that the state of our rivers and streams is not what it should be, but between 2000 and 2010 we really did not know that, because the monitoring did not take place. It came as a shock that our rivers were in the state they were in. I welcome the fact that the Government are now being transparent, are committing to targets and are really taking this on.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The time limit has now reduced to three minutes.

2.12 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Pope Francis said in 2015 in his encyclical, “*Laudato si*”:

“The earth, our home, is beginning to look...like an immense pile of filth.”

He was not wrong when it comes to the rivers in the UK. I thank my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State for coming, along with my hon. Friends the Members for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) and for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), to a meeting at Jackson’s Boat, on the trans-Pennine trail, on the River Mersey in my constituency. We met Jamie Woodward, the physical geography professor from Manchester University who is doing so much work for us on the Mersey in our local area.

When we met, we were so pleased to see how well the Mersey was being used by cyclists, walkers and kayakers. However, according to the Environment Agency data, in my constituency United Utilities is the worst offender for dumping sewage into our local rivers and coastal waters. It pains me to say that, because I generally have a great relationship with United Utilities—it helps with my cost of living events all the time—but it had almost 70,000 discharges into our regional waterways. The smoking gun or incontrovertible proof is the loo roll, sanitary ware and baby wipes that bedeck tree roots, branches and plants along the course of the river. I cycle along it from my constituency to Stockport, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra), every week and see this with my own eyes.

I may have misheard the Secretary of State, but I cannot go along with her idea that the River Mersey is getting cleaner. Greenpeace recently said that it is more polluted than the great Pacific garbage patch, as a result of a recent scientific investigation that it carried out.

The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), who is sitting next to the Secretary of State, has done great work on floodplains and flood alleviation, so I am not just making a party political point.

The River Mersey rises in Stockport and heads through the north-west to Liverpool bay. In 2022, it was 70 miles of pollution, with raw sewage being pumped into the water 1,187 times, with the pumping of untreated human faeces and urine happening for 3,346 hours. This issue is too important for us all. There are existential consequences for our environment, for our public health and for businesses that rely on the beauty and nature to attract business and investment. These waters are the same ones that the children of United Utilities staff and its shareholders wade through. It is unconscionable that it continues these practices in full knowledge of that. I urge it and its pension funds, Lazard Asset Management, BlackRock and the Vanguard Group, not to sanction this any longer. I urge them to do the right thing today.

2.15 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): I am pleased to be here again with an opportunity to discuss this important issue. Improving water quality, be it of our river systems or coastal environments, is incredibly important and all of us in this House care deeply about it. That is why I was pleased to vote for the Environment Act, which put in place key mechanisms, one of which obliges all water companies to monitor water quality and publish real-time data on storm overflows. We are nearly at a position where we will have 100% data collection.

The second mechanism is investment, with a requirement on all water companies to deliver up to £56 billion of capital investment over the next 25 years in improving our water quality. Thirdly, the Secretary of State can issue a direction on water companies to ensure that they enact their ability to clean up our rivers. The fourth mechanism is immediate investment, with direct investment of up to £7 billion in the next 25 years.

All those are great measures, but it has to be noted that the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens actively voted against them. They voted against direct investment of £56 billion to clean up our rivers. All of us should not forget that during this debate. The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have also brought out the plan for water, with a requirement actively to reinvest all fines on water companies into schemes to improve our environment. I am pleased that the Conservatives have brought that forward.

Ilkley has the River Wharfe, the first river to be awarded bathing water status in the UK. That application was generated by the Ilkley Clean River Group, which worked incredibly hard to get it over the line. I had many a conversation with the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) and the Secretary of State on that. What does it deliver? More involvement in active monitoring and Yorkshire Water is investing up to £13 million in infrastructure work in Ilkley. All those mechanisms will help to improve the River Wharfe in my constituency.

So I am pleased about the Environment Act and the measures we have brought forward, but I am incredibly disappointed that the Labour party is using this opportunity

to proactively do something that all Conservative Members are doing already: we are bringing forward positive measures that are going to help clean up our river systems. It is disappointing that once again the Opposition are choosing to play party politics with something that is much more important to our constituents: cleaning up our river systems.

2.18 pm

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): We all dream of crystal-clear rivers winding their way through the beautiful British countryside, into our towns and cities, and out into a clean and glistening sea. Sadly, that is not the image that constituents up and down the country are familiar with. Instead, they are faced with the reality of endless hours of raw sewage being dumped into our rivers.

The Government have been weak on water companies and soft on sewage. As a result, our rivers and seas are plagued by sewage, agricultural run-off and diffuse pollution. Shockingly, analysis shows that sewage dumping is taking place every two and a half minutes. We all know that the environmental consequences are catastrophic, but it is not just the environment and the wildlife that are affected. The Tory sewage scandal has serious consequences for public health and for businesses that rely on the beauty and nature of Britain to attract visitors and thrive.

That is certainly the case in my constituency. The River Dee, which flows through it, is one of Chester's greatest assets, playing a vital part in our history and day-to-day life. The Groves, on the riverbank, is home to numerous businesses, which rely on the beauty and of course the cleanliness of the river. It is a popular destination for Cestrians and visitors alike to enjoy leisure activities. That is why, when I was elected at the end of last year, one of my first acts was to bring together Welsh Water, local river groups, businesses and residents for a summit on the Dee to set out a vision for a clean river, free from the frequent sewage discharges that we see today.

Businesses and sports clubs that rely on the river have told me of the serious consequences that they are facing: people are less keen to take part in river-based activities, and customers are even turned away from hospitality businesses on days when the smell is too bad. Chester businesses are losing trade as a direct result of the Government's sewage scandal. Indeed, on previous occasions, the world-famous Chester regatta—the oldest regatta in the world, which is celebrating its 290th anniversary this year—has had to be abandoned because of sewage discharges. I sincerely hope that, by the time of its 300th anniversary, sewage discharges will be a thing of the past.

According to data published by the Rivers Trust, a total of 919 hours' worth of untreated sewage and storm water was discharged into the river in 2020. Despite nearly half a billion pounds being cut from the budget by central Government in the past 13 years, innovative projects such as Cheshire West and Chester Council's new 1 km rainwater drainage tunnel are helping to alleviate the pressure on our sewage system and reduce the amount of foul waste that ends up in the Dee. Only half the funding towards the drain costs was provided by Government. That is just a drop in the

ocean—or rather a drop in Dee—of what is actually needed to tackle the scale of the problem. The scale of change needed to eradicate—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I thank the hon. Lady.

2.21 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): We all care about this issue. I am a Cornish MP and know more than anyone how difficult the issue is for constituents who really care not just about the quality of the water in which they swim, but about marine life and the importance of our rivers for supporting really good ecological systems. We often refer in this place to the responsibilities of the water companies, but we do not talk about the fact that what must go into the system has to come out somewhere. When we ask children in primary school, they understand that, if we were to switch off storm overflows tomorrow, the sewage and all the waste would come up in their homes. The idea that we should switch those off today and appease all our voters is ludicrous, because they will soon be arguing and chasing us down the street because of what we have done to their homes.

Let me give an example. In Cornwall, in order to reduce storm overflows, septic tanks could not be emptied last year. That meant care homes, private homes and businesses could not clean out their septic tanks. It was havoc. It was driven by the need to clean up what we put on our land, which I support, and by the need to reduce storm overflows, which I also support, but it was done in a way that did not understand what the immediate implications would be. It was a massive problem. Following a lot of pressure from MPs, the Environment Agency adjusted the advice to allow us to get round that. As a result, South West Water is building in massive capacity—treatment plants to store this stuff in times of high waterfall. We need to be careful that what we ask for does not create alternative consequences that we would not want in our own homes and the homes of our constituents.

However, this is not about Government doing nothing. I have had conversations with the Minister about this going back many years. Today, because of her actions and the actions of others, £50 million is being spent on the Isles of Scilly alone to clean up the water that people drink and how the sewage is treated and then put into the sea. That money is being spent because the Government forced that to happen and ensured that it happened. I have had money spent in St Ives, Carbis Bay and St Erth—a massive amount of money has been spent in St Erth where the treatment plant is—Mousehole, Newland and Porthleven. My experience as an MP is that, when we engage constructively with Ministers and the water companies, we can get these things done and done quickly—or at least more quickly than was happening previously.

I find this whole debate infuriating because it fails to take broader responsibility on the question of how we communicate with our constituents about their water use, how we make sure that councils reduce the run-off into combined sewage systems, and how we work with farmers to understand how we can plough differently to stop water pouring into the water systems. This is not just about beating up water companies, on which the Government introduced regulation to correct the problem as soon as we can.

2.24 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Having discarded my carefully crafted speech, I will make just a few key points.

I think the Secretary of State fails to understand just how strongly our constituents feel about the issue of pollution in our waterways. It is one of the key issues that my constituents talk to me about and not just now—they have been doing so for a while. In April 2021, I had a Westminster Hall debate on this very issue as a result of that pressure from constituents, so this has been a consistent theme. That was followed by the many debates we had during the progress of the Environment Bill on the extent of action that should be taken on the issue, and we know how much public interest there was on the issue.

As co-chair of the all-party water group, I have the chance to speak regularly to water companies—not just my own—and to the regulators to find out what is happening, so I know about the changes that are being proposed. And that is as far as it goes. This morning, we had a presentation from David Black, the chief executive of Ofwat, explaining the current framework. But the fact is that the regulators—both the financial regulators of water, Ofwat, and the environmental regulators—are guided by Government action and Government decisions. Frankly, I do not believe we are going far enough or fast enough in resolving the issue of combined sewer overflows. How can it be right that there are another 27 years to go before we actually reach a stage where we have resolved the problem? Therefore, I think the Government plans are lacking ambition and should go further.

In the end, it is the Government who set the parameters of regulation and the fact is, as I have said, that they lack ambition. Our constituents want to see improvement much earlier than is being proposed. They want to be able to bathe in rivers and seas without fearing that they will be contaminated by sewage overflow and effluent. That is why I support Labour's plan to act much more swiftly and to end this scandal of sewage discharges into rivers and seas. I hope the Government will step up their action to make sure that the scandal ends.

2.27 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): We are here today thanks to the work of the Environmental Audit Committee—work that was largely led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), who is not in his place at the moment, and who is far too modest to take a lot of the plaudits for why we are here now.

Constituents talk to me about sewage dumping in the sea. Nine out of 10 times I am challenged, they have not been given the proper information, I am sad to say. What has been pumped out to them is largely disingenuous and a mischaracterisation of what is a deeply serious issue. After the recent weeks of gutter politics from the Opposition, it seems that they have not changed their spots today. In many cases, it is dangerous for MPs to have some of these accusations levelled at them. What we should be doing today is being responsible and showing what the Government really have done.

I say as a member of the EAC that it was our work that brought to the Government's attention the appalling conduct of the water companies and the lackadaisical behaviour of the Environment Agency. Our work largely

led to the strengthening of the Environment Act and what we have today—all courtesy of the water quality in rivers inquiry inspired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow.

Of course CSOs must be phased out, but we simply cannot do that overnight, not unless we want to see rainwater and sewage mixed together coming up through our Victorian network into our homes and streets. However, the fact is that we did not know what was happening with any great visibility until the EAC shone a light on it. Our job in this House is to be responsible legislators. We cannot vote for unworkable pieces of law, and the Duke of Wellington amendment that led to this whole debate was unworkable. We cannot turn off CSOs after heavy rainfall tomorrow—that is not feasible—but what is feasible is the plan of action we have now.

In my constituency, we have been responsible. Anglian Water is investing £30 million in infrastructure to improve sites across my region, including dealing with sewage outflows. The responsible actions of this Government put us well ahead of many countries across the world, including, in Europe, France and Germany.

If there is one statistic I could leave the Labour party with, it would be that it is a Conservative Government who have increased the percentage of bathing waters classified as good or excellent from 76% in 2010 to 93% in 2022. That is a record of serious improvement and the new plan for water that we have set out is a serious step forward in tackling this problem.

2.30 pm

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): To be frank, for the past three or four years, my team and I have had to discuss excrement on an almost daily basis. It is the stuff ruining the lives of my constituents in Whitstable.

In a coastal town such as ours, so much revolves around the sea: our sailing clubs, seafood and hospitality businesses, and our reputation as a top British tourist destination. Whitstable is always thriving, busy with dog walkers, boats coming and going and visitors enjoying a pint at the Neptune or a tub of locally caught whelks with their chips, but there are days when regular swimmers and sailors cannot enjoy our waters at all, something we see far too often.

So-called rare storm events are not that at all. We have not had any storms, yet Southern Water has again been releasing sewage water into the sea for 24 hours straight this weekend—why? Whitstable is still a great place to visit, but while these incidents keep happening, there is a real danger to UK tourism, which has already suffered a great hit to visitor numbers since Brexit. French schoolchildren, who did not previously require a passport, are no longer flocking to Canterbury's market stalls or studying at our language schools. We simply cannot afford the added damage that the headlines about sewage are doing to our economy.

However, it seems that not everyone is suffering. Those at the top of the water companies can probably afford to holiday elsewhere, while my constituents, whose incomes have taken a considerable hit, are expected to pay their water bills in full. It is little wonder that many are really angry about this. SOS Whitstable is a campaign group that was formed following a public meeting I held in the summer of 2021 so that residents could directly confront the bosses of Southern Water. It is a group of

very driven and knowledgeable campaigners who give their time for free, holding the water company to account and refusing to let it get away with dumping sewage on our beaches.

SOS Whitstable recently appeared in Paul Whitehouse's excellent, must-watch BBC documentary "Our Troubled Rivers". I urge anyone who wants to understand more about this situation to watch it on catch-up. SOS also started a petition, recently handed in to No. 10, calling on the Government to reconsider renationalising the water industry.

I have asked three Secretaries of State to visit our town and hear from residents about exactly how they are affected. I say to the current Secretary of State, "Please come and take me up on that offer and listen to our sailors, our swimmers and our tourist businesses."

2.32 pm

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): Most colleagues on the Government Benches, myself included, have had a fair bit of what I like to call online sewage since the landmark Environment Act 2021 was passed, not least since the Duke of Wellington's amendment was discussed in this House. I must say that Opposition parties like to talk the talk, but they are not walking the walk, as this Government are doing.

I served on the Bill Committee for the 2021 Act, and I was proud to do so, because it was a landmark piece of legislation and the first time any Government were tackling the problem. The Opposition Members on that Bill Committee did not say anything like the things they like to say in the Chamber. They were constructive and we all came together as a good Bill Committee should to try to make the best possible piece of legislation, which we did.

Speaking as someone who likes to swim in the sea and has done so since I was a kid, I know that anyone else who grew up near the sea will remember—if they are truthful—that they will have swum past, I am sorry to say, tampons, sanitary towels and actual faeces in the water. It was not just in Cornwall; I grew up in the north-east, off Scarborough, and it was happening there as well.

Some of the surfers in Cornwall joke that in the 1970s they would go to the toilet at the top of their village and watch it come out through the sewerage when they got down to the bottom—and that is not a lie; it actually happened. To say that this is a Tory sewage crisis is absolutely ridiculous. This is a Tory sewage solution. We are finally grasping this problem and getting to the nub of it.

Last October in St Agnes, there was a big run-off that was videoed and made national headlines. It looked awful. We learned that it was run-off; we have to believe that, because that is what South West Water and the Environment Agency say, but my constituents are convinced it was more than that, because of the smell that they smelled. I ask the Secretary of State: can we have better and faster testing for those overflows when we are not sure what is happening? If we knew what was in the water, we could have a more positive campaign by local authorities and water companies to say, "This water is now safe to swim in and you will not get ill from it." I hope the work we are doing now will lead to that.

South West Water is doing a lot of work around the Fal, including at the Falmouth sewage treatment works, Old Hill, 24 North Parade and Prince of Wales Pier. Some £13.2 million will be spent by 2025 and £40 million by 2030. South West Water is a one-star company that needs to get back to being a four-star company; it is starting to do the work, but there is much more to do. If I may make one final plea to the Secretary of State, when the consultation has finished, can we ensure that the fines imposed on water companies go back into fixing these problems? That will help us along the way.

2.35 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Last year in my constituency there were 685 sewage spills, the total duration of which came to more than 2,000 hours. Needless to say, my constituents have noticed them.

I was recently contacted by 85 year 5 pupils from Moorside Primary School in Lancaster who are particularly concerned about pollution in Lake Windermere and the impact it is having on wildlife and the environment. I want to give a voice to those young constituents of mine today. One pupil, Karina, says that it feels as if "the lake is no longer a tranquil body of water it is just a mass of raw grotesque sewage".

They inform me that the Ambleside treatment works is built for 5,000 people, even though millions visit the area every single year. They worry that the situation is getting worse and highlight the fact that in 2016 there were around 100,000 hours of spills by water companies in England, but by 2021 that had increased to 2.5 million.

My constituents are troubled by the impact on local wildlife, especially the number of dead fish that have been seen in the area and the knock-on impact that will have on birds such as kingfishers. My young constituents are angry about the £600 million in profits made by United Utilities, which they feel should be spent on addressing sewage spills in Lake Windermere. They accept that United Utilities is investing £40 million in trying to address some of the problems, but, as James from year 5 perceptively highlights,

"intelligent people know that they could be investing a lot more", especially given their profits, and Anya says it is "too little too late".

The pupils highlight that the spills do not only affect animals; while they are worried for their pets, especially the dogs who wade in Lake Windermere, they are also worried about the impact on people. As Freya highlights, "innocent little children who go paddling in the sewage filled lake could end up becoming sick and have diarrhoea and end up going to hospital".

Evie asks:

"Is it acceptable to put raw sewage into our lakes...or should the government put a stop to it?"

My view is that the Government should put a stop to it, and I would be grateful if the Minister answered Evie's question in her response.

No one should have to worry about whether they can enjoy areas of outstanding natural beauty or whether they will encounter raw sewage by taking a dip in our waters. No business should have to worry about Tory-sanctioned sewage dumping impacting their trade. If Tory MPs fail to support today's motion, they will be voting again to continue dumping sewage, and it is clear from the letters I have received from more 80 children in my constituency that they can see that that would stink.

2.38 pm

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): Gedling's southern border is the River Trent between Colwick and Burton Joyce. It is popular with boaters, walkers and fishermen and is probably one of the prettiest parts of my constituency. With other parts such as Gedling village, which has the Ouse Dyke running through it, it makes Gedling a great place to live. There is a legitimate public concern about the quality of the water in those places, a concern that I share.

Listening to some of the debate, one might think that no sewage was ever dumped in a river before 2010, which, of course, is not the case. The problems that we are dealing with are a legacy of a combined Victorian sewer system that carries both waste and surface run-off. Indeed, while researching a completely unrelated subject recently, I came across an article in *The Times* from 20 April 1923. It contains a Ministry of Agriculture circular about pollution that says:

"In this country, except in special localities, the most usual kind of pollution is sewage in bulk so great that it de-oxygenates the water and so suffocates the fish."

Fortunately, our river quality has moved on quite a way since then. Certainly, in Colwick—just a couple of hundred yards beyond the boundary of my constituency—they are building a new salmon fish pass because of the increased number of salmon in the River Trent, which is a good sign. However, I acknowledge that there is a serious problem to solve, so I welcome the storm overflows discharge reduction plan and the plan for water, which will deliver £56 billion-worth of investment to reduce storm overflows, prosecute polluting water companies, and introduce unlimited fines and increased and better monitoring.

I understand that there will be concern about whether that change is happening fast enough—many will feel that it is not—but government is about making difficult choices. We could stop storm overflows tomorrow by stopping surface run-off, but I understand that doing so would make 140,000 homes in the Severn Trent Water region liable to flooding, which would be unacceptable. We have also heard about introducing uncoded measures. Those could triple the cost of a water bill, which, given the cost of living issues that we face at the moment, would be equally unacceptable.

I am not prepared to back motions that would increase water bills at this difficult time or cause such unconscionable consequences. We have a detailed and coded plan that will make a difference to the quality of our water, and we should stick with it.

2.41 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): The shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), and my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane)—my Greater Manchester neighbours—made powerful contributions highlighting the important issues that we face in Greater Manchester.

According to Environment Agency data from last year, United Utilities—the water company that covers the north-west of England—was the most polluting water company of them all. Despite that, the outgoing chief executive made £1.4 million from the sale of shares in the business. That goes to the heart of the

problem: if the Government do not hold private water companies to account with existing legislation and by creating new mechanisms to do so, they are rewarding catastrophic environmental damage. How is it that since privatisation, water bills have risen by 40% while £72 billion has gone to private water company shareholders?

Indeed, much-needed investment in infrastructure has fallen by 15%. According to the *Financial Times*, English water companies leak about 20% of water supply, compared with just 5% in Germany. United Utilities and Yorkshire Water alone were responsible for 124,000 of the sewage spills by water companies in England last year, accounting for 40% of the total number recorded. In reality, private water companies are simply allowed to get away with it because of a combination of a lack of ambition and the deliberate defunding of the Environment Agency, as the Conservatives have done with other public bodies.

In August last year, the Government published their storm overflows discharge reduction plan, which requires water companies to reduce discharges into designated bathing water and high-priority nature sites. Yet there is one glaring omission. Where is the plan to eliminate sewage dumping into our natural environment, and why should our constituents have to reach further into their pockets to cover rising bills when the rule-breaking bosses should pay the price?

Last year, the River Mersey, which runs through my constituency, had waste dumped in it almost 1,000 times, triggering an inquiry from Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council. It was reported only last week that plans to plant a new woodland in Stockport borough were cancelled after it was discovered that a field was so saturated with sewage that the soil could be too toxic for the trees. In March, the Industry and Regulatory Committee's report on the water industry found that

"Ofwat and the Environment Agency must go further to hold water companies to account for pollution."

It further stated that the Government must ensure that "adequate funding" is available. But that, again, is part of the problem. According to analysis by the Prospect trade union, the Government's grant for environmental protection is currently 56% lower in real terms than in 2009-10.

Without enforcement, water companies are allowed to self-report breaches of permits that allow them to release raw sewage in exceptional circumstances via storm overflows, but evidence suggests that water firms are responsible for 10 times more sewage-dumping than they disclose. We have seen consistent rule-breaking, increased risk to public health, our leisure sites polluted and the undermining of Ofwat and the Environment Agency. The Labour party has a plan to tackle that head-on—why do the Government not have a plan?

2.44 pm

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I support ambitious targets for reducing sewage discharges; I support stronger regulation of the water companies; I support stricter enforcement and penalties for water companies found guilty of discharging sewage into our waterways. That is why I support the Government's very clear and practical plan, which sets us on a course to achieve all those aims.

This issue matters to me and to my constituents in coastal Pembrokeshire. During the course of 2021, my constituency had 79,000 hours of sewage discharged. That is completely unacceptable, and local people in Pembrokeshire feel angry about it. Who is responsible for water policy in Wales and for reducing sewage discharge through legislation and regulation? As we have heard, it is the Welsh Government, through Natural Resources Wales.

It is dismaying that this important issue, which should be tackled on a pragmatic cross-party basis, has been reduced again to a political football. We know that it is a political football because Labour has been briefing the media. I read in the newspaper this morning that it is part of a plan for Labour's local election strategy. It has nothing to do with tackling the environmental problems in our constituencies; it is a clever wheeze—or, at least, Labour thinks it is clever—to get a few more votes at the local elections.

That does a huge disservice to the campaigners in our constituencies who have taken the time to write and talk to us about these issues over recent years—and not just in recent years. Surfers Against Sewage has had a presence in my constituency for 30 years and has been talking about this for decades. It is a healthy thing that this matter is now right at the top of the political agenda. It is thanks to the hard work of a lot of grassroots campaigners that we have got to this point.

I will not go into too much more detail about the situation in Wales, but suffice it to say that when we had a debate about this matter last year, the Welsh Government—who are normally very keen for everyone to be aware of the issues and policy areas that they are responsible for—kept their heads way down. They did not want people in Wales to know that they have legislative responsibility for water policy in Wales.

I wrote to the Minister to ask the Welsh Government what the plan is. We know what the UK Government's plan is for England, but where is the plan for Wales? I got a letter back saying that:

"Replacing all the existing CSOs would be a long-term multi billion pound project, be very carbon intensive and take many years. Instead, the Welsh Government is looking at nature solutions."

It also said that they do not feel it necessary to "replicate the approach being taken in England."

Yet the motion before us suggests that that is Labour policy. It should not be. We need a better approach.

2.47 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind): The water industry is a classic illustration of the harms of privatisation and the contradiction of a Government who claim that privatisation is more efficient while giving companies free rein to profit by damaging the environment.

In 2021, Severn Trent Water—the water company in my constituency—was fined £1 million for a 2018 raw sewage discharge that lasted for hours, and £500,000 for a separate incident. In the previous year, the firm had been fined £800,000 for similar issues. By 2020 and 2021, Severn Trent Water had discharged untreated sewage into our waterways and seas 60,000 times, with an average duration of almost 10 hours per incident. Despite that, the company boasted that it had received the Government's highest four-star rating.

Incredibly, Severn Trent's chief executive is now advising the Government on water, waste discharges and biodiversity.

At the same time as it pollutes, Severn Trent is paying out huge dividends to shareholders, including a recent payout of 43p per share on more than 254 million shares—more than £109 million to wealthy investors. It pays out dividends twice a year. Severn Trent Water was only the third worst offender in England among water companies. According to the most recent DEFRA data, there were more than 370,000 sewage discharges a year, but fines are rarely imposed. The foxes are running the chicken coop. The Government described Severn Trent's actions as "completely unacceptable", but they reward it for its recklessness.

It is evident from those figures that the privatisation of the UK's water supply is a disaster for our people, who pay a heavy price financially and in quality of life, and for nature and our environment. It is a disaster for everyone, in fact, apart from the water companies and their investors, who make millions while they pollute. It is clear that the only real solution to this situation is full renationalisation so that those who are running services are accountable and any surpluses can drive reinvestment and lower bills, instead of fattening corporate profits and offshore bank accounts.

2.50 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. The Opposition have attempted to pretend that the Government do not care about sewage, or about water companies being held to account, and yet in every instance, in every debate, and with every measure that we have introduced, we have shown that we care about the quality of water in our rivers and on our coastline, that we care about bathing-water status and, above all, that we care about holding water companies to account. This is not a moment to say, "Job done. Well done. Move on to the next issue." It is a continuing, rolling issue that we have to address to provide reassurance to constituents and ensure that they have a reassured view of water companies.

All the measures that we have introduced to date have put in place exactly what the Opposition propose in the Bill they want to introduce. They talk about dividend payments—those are already restricted by Ofwat's new measures. They talk about a new regulator—a costly thing to try to change—yet we have given Ofwat the teeth to take action against water companies that fail to deliver. We have implemented the ability to impose criminal fines and to put directors and CEOs in jail if they do not deliver. We have also offered the opportunity to impose unlimited fines on water companies under the "polluter pays" principle. The Opposition say that we take no action, yet we have proven legislative delivery that is already having an impact and being implemented across our constituencies. The £56 billion investment that we have asked for requires the water companies to take action, rather than putting the costs on our constituents at a difficult time. That is a balanced approach that will enable us to deliver and clean up our waterways, ensuring better biodiversity and even more areas with bathing-water status.

It is extremely easy for the Opposition to pat themselves on the back about 2009 and 2010, when there were limited monitoring systems across the United Kingdom.

[Anthony Mangnall]

Now there is 90% monitoring—set to be 100% by the end of the year—and we can point to the problem and to the solutions, and show that we are delivering them. That is exactly what the Government are doing. My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) said that this is a Tory solution to the sewage problem, and we should be proud of that.

I have taken South West Water to task, and I will continue to do so. It has a lot more to do to regain the confidence of the British public, especially in the south-west. I have taken its officials to do town halls in Brixham. This Thursday, I will take them to Totnes—I will let the House know how I get on—to talk about what is being done in the local area, to try to rebuild confidence, to show that work has been done. I have to say, however, that when we politicise this issue we do so to our detriment, because there is a proud record to show.

2.53 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): We have the shameful situation where not one English river is classed as being in a healthy condition, none of them meets good chemical standards, and few meet good ecological standards. Many colleagues represent constituencies that have been impacted more seriously by the mismanagement of our waterways, but still, in Luton South, there were 12 spills totalling nine hours last year.

In Luton, we are particularly proud to have the River Lea, a chalk stream which rises in the neighbouring constituency of Luton North and flows all the way through Luton South, ultimately to the River Thames. Chalk streams provide pure, clear, constant water from underground chalk aquifers and springs. Eighty-five per cent. of the world's chalk streams are in England, and they are one of the planet's rarest habitats. They are vulnerable to drought, as we heard, as illustrated by the 2019 drought, which dried out 67% of chalk streams in the Chilterns. We therefore need the Government to commit to protecting the future of chalk streams.

Sadly, the Conservatives' record on water quality more widely is one of polluted waters and open spaces. Since 2016, 1,276 years'-worth of raw sewage has been dumped in British waters. In 2022 alone, there were 824 sewage dumps a day across the country. Despite representing a landlocked constituency many miles from the sea, I know how important our coast is to many in our Luton community. Not everyone has the means to holiday abroad, and for many families a trip to the seaside is the highlight of their summer. Every child deserves to be able to enjoy playing on the beach, paddling in the sea, safe from harm, so the Government cannot shirk responsibility for this failure.

During the passage of the Environment Act 2021, Conservative MPs had the opportunity to support a Labour-backed amendment that would have brought an end to sewage dumping. However, instead of putting the country and our communities first, Conservative MPs walked through the Lobby to block those changes and voted to continue the Tory sewage scandal. That is despite the consequences for our environment, for public health and for businesses that rely on the beauty and nature of Britain to attract visitors and thrive.

Not only have the Conservatives given the green light to water companies to dump sewage and neglect our vital water infrastructure, but they have rewarded them for it. Shareholders are walking away with billions in dividends, with bumper bonuses for negligent water bosses. Thirteen years of Tory Government have taken our country backwards, allowing it to be treated like an open sewer. I urge all Members to support Labour's water quality Bill, particularly those who say that it is already happening. They should back the Bill, as we need four extra reduction measures, with no extra burden on household bills, but I fear that yet again we will see Tory Members walk through the Lobby to block these changes and continue the Tory sewage scandal.

2.56 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I stand with the people of beautiful Hastings and Rye, who are all quite rightly angry about the extent of water companies' excessive use of overflows. Only the Conservatives have come up with a proper, fully costed plan, and I am proud of and support the work that the Government are doing to deal with this issue, as well as the work that I do engaging with Southern Water and my constituents, to improve water quality and resources locally and to reduce sewage flooding.

I am somewhat bemused that the Opposition have tabled the motion for debate. They are far behind the narrative in trying to secure targets for sewage discharges and protect water quality. I want to express my deep disappointment in Labour and its leadership. I thought the days of Momentum and its dirty, dangerous and polarising politics had disappeared with the election of a leader who, from the outset, seemed to be someone with a plan, with integrity. However, recent weeks in particular have shown that Corbynism and Momentum politics have not disappeared. We have seen personal, misinformed attacks on the Prime Minister. We have seen personal, misinformed attacks on many Conservative MPs about sewage discharges, to the extent that many colleagues live in fear for themselves and their families. I thought that we were all trying to work together to bring the political debate back to more polite, constructive and sensible discourse, to help to reduce the horrendous abuse with which many MPs struggle on a daily basis. I was wrong.

Only this morning, I read an article in *The Guardian* that began:

"Labour to use tactic that finished off Truss to force Tories into sewage vote".

That message was spread on social media by Opposition supporters, including a former popstar who has new-found fame attacking Conservative MPs about a subject they all seem to know little about.

This is all about politicking for Labour. Its tactics smack of desperation. It does not care about sewage issues, because if it did, Wales under the Labour-controlled Senedd would have a world-class water and sewerage system. It does not. Labour has been responsible in Wales for 23 years, and Wales has almost twice the amount of sewage discharges that England does.

This Conservative Government are the first UK Government to instruct water companies to prioritise the environment, both by imposing new legal duties on water companies under our landmark Environment

Act 2021, and by giving new powers to Ofwat. This is the Government who will sort out water companies, and I stand by the measures that they take.

2.59 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Raw sewage is the perfect metaphor for 13 years of Tory Britain. It is hard to find an NHS dentist or get a GP appointment, and it is hard to get a passport or find a lettuce or a tomato in a supermarket, but we can go for a swim among human waste, faeces, nappies and used condoms in our lakes, rivers and seas. Britain deserves so much better than this.

There were more than 37,000 sewage spills in the south-west last year. In Plymouth alone, there were more than 2,000, an average of five spills every single day—that means that it is only 1,220 sewage spills until Christmas for us Janners—so why has South West Water been let off the hook? It is failing as a company to close down the raw sewage outlets that we need it to close in order to have a protected and safe region. In Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport, there have been 8,750 hours of dumping from 1,574 spills. In Plymouth, Moor View, there have been 4,000 hours from 540 spills, with more in South West Devon and in Torridge and West Devon, whose rivers flow past Plymouth. It is not good enough.

Clean water matters to me—it mattered to me when I spoke from the Front Bench, and it matters to me when I speak now. In 2017, I proposed that Plymouth sound be designated as the UK's first ever national marine park. In 2019, we achieved that status, and thanks to £10 million of heritage lottery money, we are improving access to the water, celebrating Plymouth's maritime history and cleaning up our waters. For the past year, I have been campaigning for Devil's Point and Firestone bay to be designated as an official bathing water, with regular water testing so that people like me who swim in that part of Plymouth sound can see what we are swimming in. I am grateful to Ministers for agreeing to the campaign; that status starts in only a few weeks' time.

The truth is that ending the sewage scandal is in the Government's hands. They can mandate investment in closing raw sewage outlets in water company business plans. They can introduce automatic fines for sewage dumping. They can introduce mandatory monitoring for all sewage outlets and make sure each one of those monitors is working. They can introduce legally binding targets to end 90% of raw sewage discharges by 2030, and they can prioritise rivers and sewage in the next set of business plans. But they could do more: they could introduce more stormwater retention tanks, automatic fines and real-time data so that we can see what is happening, and they could close the gap between a spill and a fine that currently takes many years to deliver. I would also like to see more of the money from fines go to improve our environment. Higher-level fines nearly all go to the Treasury: we need more going to our environment to improve it along the way.

3.2 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I think we can all agree that sewage flooding is revolting. Few people know this better than my constituents in Thorpe, who have already experienced it twice this year in their gardens and homes, yet what Labour and the Lib Dems fail to mention is that if we were to simply

click our fingers and ban sewage overflows into rivers, the result would be many more households experiencing sewage flooding as it backed up into their homes at times of flooding or heavy rainfall.

No one wants sewage overflowing into our rivers, either, and it is clear that there has been a lack of investment in sewage infrastructure over decades, which has led to this situation. However, rather than knee-jerk reactions and uncoded plans aimed at political campaigning and PR, we believe in working towards long-term solutions to protect our rivers. That is why we passed the Environment Act 2021, which introduced new targets and measures to require water companies to take action. It is why we are legislating to enshrine those targets in law, ensuring that they are deliverable and cost-effective for bill payers.

That belief is why I work closely with Thames Water and the Environment Agency to address flooding and water quality issues in Runnymede and Weybridge. It is why I press for infrastructure investment to prioritise high-use areas such as mine, so that we can deliver improvements for the maximum number of people as soon as possible. It is why I visited local sewage treatment works and pressed for modernisation that would reduce local sewage overflows, and it is why I support the £500 million—of which £250 million is coming from the Government and £250 million is coming from Surrey County Council—going towards the River Thames scheme, which will protect thousands of homes and businesses locally from flooding. It is why I will continue to campaign for practical, affordable solutions based on the needs and experiences of residents in Runnymede and Weybridge.

Opposition proposals during the passage of the Environment Act would have cost between £150 billion and £600 billion, and even then, achieving the improvements that were being promised might have proven impossible. Do Opposition Members really believe that headlines today are worth thousands of pounds in household bills each year? Do they really want to stop overflows and instead flood people's homes, or will they finally put sound financial planning, sustainability and affordability above spin, and support our plans to improve water quality without the awful consequences for residents that their plans would cause?

3.5 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): According to the Rivers Trust, in Salford alone, our waterways have been littered with thousands of hours' worth of sewage discharges in 2022, and it will take more than the Government's fluffy and toothless targets to fix the problem. The water industry has been regulated ever since it was privatised in 1989, and fining many water companies millions of pounds has demonstrably not affected their behaviour. Certain water companies have actually tried to claim in court that they are not public authorities and should not have to publish data on sewage, and years of chronic underfunding of the Environment Agency and inaction by the regulator, Ofwat, have meant that there has been an inability to enforce even the minimal regulation that is available to us in this country.

It is left to individuals and organisations to try to enforce those regulations, but even when they do, they are met with hurdles. Indeed, United Utilities sought a declaration that would effectively bar people from bringing private claims against water companies that dump sewage

[Rebecca Long Bailey]

into rivers and seas, and it won its case in the Court of Appeal most recently. That has meant that any water company can effectively dump sewage into waterways in England and Wales without fear of being sued in the civil courts by landowners, angling clubs, swimming clubs, wildlife groups, residents, or any other group with an interest in the land. As such, action is needed, and the plan described by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) is sensible and effective. I hope the whole House will support his motion today.

Beyond that, I urge all colleagues to examine the bigger picture as to why we are in the situation we are in today, and how we can ensure long-term sustainability of the water sector. Privatisation has meant that water bills have increased by 40% in real terms. We have seen £72 billion paid out in dividends to shareholders since privatisation, almost half as much as the money the sector has spent on upgrading and maintaining water and sewerage systems. The galling fact is that the private sector paid very little for the companies when it took them on in 1989, and the truth is that privatisation of our water industry was wrong—it has been a complete failure for the British public. If we are serious about tackling this ecological disaster, we need to support the Opposition's motion today, but ultimately, we need to have a serious discussion about bringing our water industry into public ownership for the public good.

3.7 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): I have previously spoken in this House about my beautiful constituency of South West Hertfordshire. We have the River Chess, the Aquadrome and the Grand Union canal, and we are very fortunate to have those beautiful waterways in our constituency.

Many constituents have contacted me about this particular issue. Politics being politics, the Opposition have used it as a bit of a political football: Members on the Government Benches will remember the Duke of Wellington's amendment, and how we were pilloried for doing what we thought was best by not agreeing to bankrupt water companies up and down the country, but instead supporting a viable plan. It is incumbent on all of us in this place to make sure that any laws we create are enforceable and implementable. More locally in South West Hertfordshire, I have held regular meetings with Thames Water, which the Government have fined extensively for its discharge of sewage—over £35 million between 2010 and 2023. I continue to make visits to both Maple Lodge sewage treatment works and the one in Aylesbury, which feeds into my constituency.

My residents are rightly angry: they look at this issue and the headlines at a glance, and it is easy to understand why. The Victorian drainage system, as many colleagues have mentioned, is one of the key issues that we need to sort out, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) said earlier, the reason we allow discharge in the first place is to prevent discharge from coming up through people's toilets and into their homes, because that is even worse, unfortunately, than the damage caused by discharge into our rivers. We need to upgrade the waterways, and we will do so. We have a viable water plan put forward by this Government,

which I continue to fully support, because the alternative proposed by Labour at the time was a £21,000 bill per household.

The second debate today will be on the cost of living. When the Secretary of State was in her place, she referred to the hypocrisy—or the irony—of the fact that on the one hand we are talking about increasing household bills and then later today we will be discussing how to support our local residents. We must continue to be honest with our constituents. Unfortunately, we sometimes need to be bearers of bad news, but we also have to be transparent. In my eyes, we should be saying, “These are the things that realistically we can implement.” The water plan put forward by the Government is very much that. The Opposition have spoken about increasing numbers of sewage releases, but a lot of that is down to increased and better recording. We should not shy away from the fact that we have better data.

I will finish there, because I am conscious of time. Thank you for allowing me to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will continue to support my residents on this important issue.

3.11 pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): The River Mersey in the great north-west of England meanders through the heart of the region and connects the great cities of Manchester and Liverpool. For centuries, it was the boundary between the historic counties of Lancashire and Cheshire. I pay tribute to the likes of the Mersey Rivers Trust, which has done so much for so long in the fight to clean up the Mersey. In our part of the world, we take our obligations to look after the Mersey extremely seriously. Recently, our Metro Mayor Steve Rotherham announced plans to make the river sewage-free by 2030. Those plans were backed by Lord Heseltine, who helped first establish the Mersey basin campaign partnership nearly 40 years ago. They both recognised that when it comes to the Mersey, there is no room for complacency.

Growing up in Liverpool, my generation and the one before it saw the toll taken on the river and its estuary, yet the bold action set out by our Metro Mayor risks being undermined by those on the Government Benches if they do not urgently get a grip of the issue of sewage being dumped time and time again into our waterways. The excellent reporting by Danny Rigg at the *Liverpool Echo* has stated the scale of the problem. Sewage flowed into Merseyside rivers for more than 17,000 hours from 10 wastewater treatment sites in 2020, and raw sewage flowed into the river for 11,000 hours from just five Wirral locations upstream of New Brighton in 2021. It was remarked on by the reporter that that was more than the number of hours in the entire year.

This modern Conservative party might not value our natural habitats, our precious waterways and our coastal communities, but the British people do. After all, it was this Conservative party that went out of its way to block Labour amendments to the Environment Act 2021 that would have brought an end to this practice. Rather than stand by communities, the Conservatives stood idly by, letting shareholders walk away with billions in dividends and allowing bumper bonuses for water bosses. Those on the Government Benches were belligerent in striking down the Opposition amendments, yet here we are. The Secretary of State is late to the party, no doubt

after her inbox and those of other Government Members filled up with emails from angry constituents wondering why they have consistently refused to stand up for them. It is too little, too late. I am proud that cleaning up our waterways, our rivers and our seas, taking on the water companies for their negligence and supporting our people are priorities for this Opposition. We will take action on these things in government.

3.13 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I am perplexed as to why we need another Bill on this topic, particularly when it is uncoded and would result in a threefold increase in water bills and when we already have the epic Environment Act 2021. What we really need to do is implement what is in that Act. While I fully accept that far more needs to be done, particularly on what is running into our rivers, we also need to acknowledge where progress has been made, especially when our vital tourism economy is so reliant on the quality of our water.

South West Water is responsible for 34% of all our bathing waters and for 10 million visitors to that region. We have 100% of those bathing waters now at bathing water quality, up from 90% in 2010. In my beautiful North Devon constituency, I have nine designated bathing waters, all of which are good or excellent. We have already seen a 50% reduction in bathing season storm overflows and a 75% reduction in the duration of spills. The investment by South West Water in the fantastic surf beach of Croyde has now seen its bathing quality rise from good to excellent. Anyone familiar with North Devon's beautiful beaches knows how much better water quality is compared with 20 to 30 years ago.

Only 1% of the water pollution we are dealing with is sewage. More than 95% of our storm overflow discharge is rainwater. Anyone watching South West Water's new WaterFit Live app will note that the overflows run after extensive rain, which is completely different from raw sewage being dumped on the beaches, particularly when the alternative is that it gets washed up into people's front rooms. It is only because we are now monitoring the situation that we know what is going on.

The crystal clear waters of North Devon are beckoning. We have the first cold-water surf reserve in the world and the first UNESCO biosphere reserve. We pride ourselves on our waters. Indeed, people should come wild swimming in my patch. They will see dolphins playing, and they might see mermaid purses on the beach. The sharks do go past—it is pretty wild out there. We have jellyfish, including ones the size of dustbin lids. With the changing climate, we occasionally get ones that sting these days. We have seals that like to play with the gig rowers. Because of the oars flapping in the water, they jump up to see people. It was a bit hairier than my normal surf companion when I caught one out on the beach.

I will be back in my waters this weekend, and I will be proud to be so. I hope that if people have not yet booked their summer holiday, they will consider coming to Croyde. On Friday, the Opposition spoke about the need to ensure that people can access our beaches. I was proud to be at the opening of the country's first adaptive surf centre, and now everyone can access that beach, with its excellent water company.

3.16 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. Before I start, I thank the Angling Trust, Surfers Against Sewage—I pay tribute to its work in coastal areas and inland—and many other groups that campaign on this important issue. I take this opportunity to talk about an unpleasant incident that happened in my constituency and neighbouring parts of Berkshire, which unfortunately illustrates the scale of the problem, the nature of what we are dealing with and, indeed, the need for urgent action—far more than has so far been committed to by the Government.

Earlier this month, there was a spill that lasted for 17 hours into a local brook called Foundry brook, sometimes known as Foudry brook, which feeds into the River Kennet, one of the main tributaries of the Thames. Ultimately, this sewage spill would have fed into the Thames at Reading and then gone onward to London. The spill happened in a beautiful rural setting of rolling countryside just outside Reading. It then passed the western edge of the town, went past the nature reserve, went through areas where people live nearby, with the backs of their gardens going down to the river, and went next to workplaces and right next to Green Park, which is a major science park in our area with thousands of employees who like to walk past the waterways. The spill carried on into the Kennet, went past County lock and into Reading town centre, through the area of the Oracle shopping centre and on past more terraced housing and more flats to Kennetmouth, where the Kennet joins the Thames. Ultimately, this dreadful slick would have continued through the rest of the Thames valley and into the sea. That is an appalling abuse that residents and people working nearby should not have to put up with. It is simply not acceptable that this type of pollution takes places in the 21st century.

I was near to Foundry brook a few weeks ago—it may have been at the time of the incident or slightly before—when I was getting ready to run the Reading half marathon. I could see and smell the water, and it really was unpleasant—that is the polite way to put it. It was deeply unpleasant. There was an awful smell and a strange tinge to the water. It did not look natural or right, despite the setting with beautiful willow trees, pollarded like something out of “The Wind in the Willows”, next to the waterway. We are talking about disgusting pollution, and there should be urgent action to tackle it. That is just one example in one community.

I thought the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) spoke beautifully about her coastal community. Inland, we also have wonderful and beautiful waterways that are full of wildlife, with large birds such as swans, smaller ones such as ducks, large fish such as pike, and a range of other fish and animals. All of this is being affected, as is people's enjoyment, by these terrible sewage incidents. They simply should not be happening. This is happening around the country—a range of constituencies have been referenced to this afternoon—and it simply should not be continuing. I do think there is a need for urgent action now. There needs to be a proper plan, with automatic fines.

3.20 pm

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): I serve on the Welsh Affairs Committee, and we have had two evidence sessions discussing the situation with water companies

[Simon Baynes]

in Wales. I have therefore spent a great deal of time recently hearing about what is going on in Wales and, frankly, this afternoon there seems to be virtually no recognition from the Opposition that the Labour party has a big problem to answer for in Wales when it comes to water quality. We have established during this debate that the Welsh Government have legislative competence for all aspects of water quality, water resources and the water industry, so it is very much the Labour party's responsibility in Wales.

I thought the speech by the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) was powerful, and it held to account the problems with Dŵr Cymru or Welsh Water. Opposition Members have continually made the point about nationalisation—it goes down slightly different lines depending on whether they are Momentum or mainstream Labour Members. In effect, Dŵr Cymru is a not-for-profit organisation, so it is not putting money into the hands of shareholders, yet as the hon. Member said, it is a very poor performer. I think that is something the Opposition need to consider.

During the Welsh Affairs Committee review of the water industry in Wales, we were very concerned by the evidence we heard about the condition of Welsh rivers and coastal waters. I make no apology for highlighting Labour's appalling performance in Wales on the water industry, and I will give one or two statistics in the time available. There were 83,000 spills in Wales in 2022. In England, there were 23 spills per overflow on average that year, whereas in Wales there were 38 spills per overflow on average, so the performance in Wales is distinctly poorer. The number of sewage spills in Wales accounted for 21% of all discharges across Wales and England, and the top two longest sewage discharges last year were in Wales—in Bridgend, which is the responsibility of Dŵr Cymru or Welsh Water. As we have heard, of the top five constituencies across the UK for hours of sewage discharge, three are in Wales: Carmarthen East and Dinefwr, Dwyfor Meirionnydd, and Preseli Pembrokeshire.

These are damning statistics, and the point I make to the Opposition is that they should be honest enough to recognise that there is a major problem in the way that Labour runs the water industry in Wales.

3.23 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It will come as no surprise to Members in the Chamber that I rise to support the Labour Front-Bench motion, because I support the Bill tabled by the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon).

The River Tame, which runs through my constituency, has the unfortunate honour of being one of the most polluted waterways in the UK. In detailed, peer-reviewed research, Professor Jamie Woodward and his team from the University of Manchester found that the Tame, which is one of two tributaries forming the River Mersey at Stockport, is heavily contaminated with microplastics, because untreated waste water and sewage are routinely discharged into the river when it is at low flow. Professor Woodward found concentrations of 130,000 microplastic particles per sediment on the riverbed around Denton. This is one of the few accessible green spaces in my constituency, and it is absolutely disgraceful.

In 2022, there were 11,000 hours of sewage discharge into the River Tame and the local environment by United Utilities. That pollution, and also the pollution from industrial processes along the river, is having a disastrous impact on the local environment. In a recent interview with Paul Whitehouse on the BBC, Chris Clarke, an angler who works closely with the Friends of the Tame Valley, told of his devastation as he watched raw sewage—not from a UU plant, but from a misconnection into Johnson brook—being pumped into the waterway on the same day that the Environment Agency was replenishing fish stocks.

Local people across my constituency are doing their very best to solve this problem. Groups such as the Friends of the Tame Valley, which I am incredibly proud to be a part of, often organise community riverbank cleans, but all too often it feels as though they are fighting an uphill battle. There has also been the formation of the River Tame working group. Spearheaded by the Mersey Rivers Trust, this brings together various community and corporate stakeholders, including United Utilities, to resolve the local operational issues and to help shape local catchment actions plans. In the interest of balance, I should say that UU is investing £100 million to immediately commence a further programme of works to reduce spill frequency at eight prioritised storm overflows, there are four river rangers and we are training a generation of river guardians.

In closing, in 2010 the Tory Prime Minister said that we are “all in it together”. I am sure he did not think that, 13 years later, that would mean the sewage in our rivers.

3.26 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I am pleased to speak in this debate to make it clear again that the use of storm overflows is unacceptable and needs to end. That is why I supported the Environment Act and new powers to require water companies to tackle this issue and for Ofwat to act, including where water companies seek to pay dividends when their environmental performance is not good enough.

North West Norfolk is home to many precious chalk streams, and one of my first visits as an MP was to walk the River Nar in Castle Acre with the Norfolk Rivers Trust, when we looked at work to restore part of the river to get it back to the natural widths, depths and gradients. As a member of the all-party parliamentary group on chalk streams, I have consistently highlighted the unacceptable use of storm overflows and the need to protect these rivers.

However, let us be candid about what ending the use of overflows, as some pretend is possible, would mean. It would mean sewage backing up into people's homes. Why do Labour and the Liberal Democrats not put that on their leaflets? Why are they not open with the public about the disgusting consequences of the proposals they have put forward? Rather than misleading claims, I am interested in practical action to make a difference, and that starts with overflows.

Looking at the motion, I wonder where Labour has been. We will have 100% of overflows monitored by the end of this year, and real-time data is coming. When Labour was last in government, the figure was 7%. Then there are fines and prosecutions. Having looked at this

area as a member of the Public Accounts Committee, I want to see the Environment Agency take far more robust action. All major water companies are under investigation for illegal sewage discharges, and regulators must use higher fines to focus the minds of chief executives and boards, which is why I support unlimited fines.

The third element is investment. There is no cheap way to fix a Victorian system combining rainwater and wastewater. In my constituency, residents suffered sewage coming up through manhole covers and into their homes when there was severe flooding. By challenging Anglian Water, I got it to reline some of the sewer network because there was groundwater infiltration, rather than just inundation of rainwater. As a result, we will see improvements and hopefully we will not see a repetition. But we need major investment, which is why the £56 billion is going to be required.

The motion calls for an impact assessment. That has been done as required by the Environment Act 2021 and the results are not good for either party. Liberal Democrats pretend that they can solve this problem overnight, but that is just wholly impractical, and the Labour plan appears to involve spending £600 billion in seven years. As my constituents would say, “What a load of squit”. Instead, the Conservative party has a plan for 100% more monitoring, requiring record investment and using penalties to tackle this problem. Now water companies and regulators must be held to account to deliver real improvements for our constituents.

3.29 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild). Let me start with some facts. In 2021, we saw a 67% increase in sewage discharges in my constituency across the River Leam and the River Avon. Of course these are discharges that are sanctioned by this Government. We have heard that there are now discharges every two and a half minutes. Let us also remember that the Conservative Government voted against the Duke of Wellington’s amendment 45 to the Environment Bill, which would have put a new duty on sewerage undertakers to improve the sewerage systems and to demonstrate progressive reductions in the harm caused by discharges of untreated sewage.

A year on, nothing has changed. The public are extremely disgusted by what they see and hear. In 2022, we had 824 sewage dumps a day across the country. Meanwhile, billions are being paid out in dividends, as we have heard, and the Severn Trent Water CEO’s pay is increasing by 25% to 27% locally. Not enough is being invested in the network, in sustainable drainage systems, or in greywater storage. One of the great hits to the situation was the change in the legislation on new builds and new housing—we have problems with rainwater runoff and the storage on those new developments has not been improved.

I am seeing and hearing real concerns from the community. I have had 52 letters from the public just in recent months. Concerns have been expressed by leisure users such as Warwick Sea Scouts, the Royal Leamington Spa Canoe Club and Warwick Boat Club, which has rowing teams using the lengths of the rivers. I have also heard from businesses, such as Warwick Boats and Leam Boat Centre, which I contacted and which told

me they are really concerned about damage to the river’s ecosystem and about public health. Of course, this has an impact on those businesses.

Let us not forget that this also impacts on wildlife. There is a desperate need to take remedial action and focus on river ecologies to protect and preserve plant and animal life. That is why Labour’s plan would impose automatic fines, set legal requirements for monitoring stations throughout our rivers and set legally binding targets. After 13 years, it is clear that the Government have failed our rivers, our canals and our beaches. The Government are out of touch with public opinion. That is why the motion is important and why I will be voting for it.

3.32 pm

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): Another pointless debate from a pointless Opposition—that’s what I am thinking today. The last time they did this, obviously, they were telling people that we were voting to dump sewage into our waterways. That was absolute nonsense. As a result of that, we had malicious communications and threats. We had some real nastiness. The party of “kinder, gentler politics” should take note, but it won’t. But listen—why would anybody vote to dump sewage in waterways? It is absolute nonsense. No one has ever done that. My friends, my family—we all use our waterways. We use our seas, beaches and rivers. It is just not true. It is a complete lie and Opposition Members should hang their heads in shame.

It is important that we put the facts out, rather than score cheap political points. I am not into this divisive dog-whistle politics. It is absolute nonsense—[*Laughter.*] Even they are laughing. What are storm overflows? They are a relief valve, so that when we have a heavy downpour of rain, sewage does not back up and go on to the streets or back into people’s houses—[*Interruption.*] Labour Members keep saying “13 years”, but the Labour party was in power for 13 years. They keep talking about the levers they are going to pull—they did absolutely nothing for 13 years. They should be ashamed—a bunch of hypocrites, the lot of them.

Water companies sometimes have to use those overflows. It is not ideal and not always acceptable. The Environment Act, which we introduced, changes that and we are acting on it. We are doing more than the Labour party ever did in its 13 years. Like all its silly ideas, the Labour party no real plan. It is just dog-whistle politics, as I said before.

In this great city, the Thames tideway tunnel is currently under construction. [*Interruption.*] I came to my senses. Somebody is chuntering from a sedentary position to say that I was once a member of the Labour party. I was, but I woke up, my senses came back and then I was elected as a Conservative MP and that shut up the lot of them. The Thames tideway tunnel will cost £5 billion and take 10 years to complete, but if that lot had their way, we would have seen sewage backing into streets and people’s houses for 10 years. The great British public are not stupid. They get it. Just like our ageing Victorian sewers, that lot are full of it.

3.35 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I would like to tell a tale of two announcements. We are used to reannouncements, where the Government use much

[Richard Foord]

fanfare to introduce funding that, it later emerges, they have announced before. But I want to describe something that is new to me: an announcement with two faces.

On 7 April, the *Sidmouth Herald* quoted a Government press release:

“This week, the water Minister”—

the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow)—

“confirmed £70 million of cash will be used to improve sewage systems in Sidmouth, Tipton St John and Axminster, as well as Falmouth in Cornwall. East Devon’s share of the cash...will help prevent sewage overflows in Sidmouth and Tipton St John, as well as water pollution in Axminster.”

On the surface, that is welcome: £70 million to improve sewage systems in east Devon. Those reading that in the paper in Devon are led to believe that that relates to our area, and might miss the passing reference to a distant town in Cornwall, but readers in my part of Devon are discerning and they notice a mention of Cornwall in a story that is supposed to be about Devon.

To get a full picture of what is going on here, one needs to travel 125 miles south-east of Axminster and read the same announcement in Falmouth’s local newspaper, *The Packet*. What does the Conservative Government’s announcement claim in Falmouth?

“South West Water’s total investment for the Falmouth area includes...a total of £40 million.”

By reading about the same announcement in the neighbouring county, we find that most of the £70 million funding is not for east Devon at all.

I, for one, will never defer to the interests of polluting water firms or simply parrot the lines they suggest we MPs might like to use. Instead, I will always stand up for my constituents, who are seeing their bills rise and profits leaking out in bonuses, all while sewage poisons our rivers and beaches.

3.37 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): Across the country, our beaches and rivers, including the River Wey Navigation, are vital for the health and wellbeing of our communities. Like my constituents, I know how important it is to make sure our natural assets are preserved, not least because every summer I swim in our waters.

It was this Conservative Government who introduced new duties on water companies to monitor water quality upstream and downstream of storm overflows and sewage disposal works. It is this Government who are working towards increasing monitoring to 100% of storm overflows by the end of this year. It was under this Government last year that fines reached a record level, where breaches were found.

The Government alone, however, cannot fix each and every leak, and each and every unfortunate discharge event. That is why I welcome the Government incentivising water companies to invest more than £7 billion by 2025 on environmental improvements while protecting people’s water bills, and I welcome the millions of pounds being invested by Thames Water in my constituency.

This is a very complex issue that needs the keen attention of a Government who look out for our waterways and beaches, and our constituents, unlike Labour and

the Liberal Democrats, who have put forward ridiculous plans that would cost up to £593 billion, or £21,000 per household. When it comes to sorting this messy situation out, it is this Conservative Government who are taking action. It is the Labour party that allowed people to pay more while the sewage flowed freely into our waterways and the water companies went unchecked.

I gently say to the Opposition that this politically motivated, politically timed debate on a highly emotive subject is not a neutral act. It overflows beyond this Chamber. I, and other Conservative colleagues, have had to have police come to our homes and offices to make sure we are safe as the result of misinformation on sewage. It has impacted our families and our staff. It is important that my Guildford constituents have the facts, not fearmongering.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Bob Seely.

3.40 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. [Interruption.] Has the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) finished? Is he done? Does he want to intervene? In spite of the relentless nastiness from the nasty party on the Opposition Benches, we found out some interesting facts today. Perhaps the Opposition can explain some of them in the wind-up.

There was literally no water monitoring under Labour. Why? There must have been mass dumping, but we do not know about it. Why? Because they hid the problem by not monitoring. What gets me most of all is that the utility firms that those class warriors profess to hate had a sweetheart deal with them to allow them to self-monitor. What a corrupting relationship between new Labour and the big utility firms. Why were they allowed to self-monitor? [Interruption.] Grinning at me inanely does not answer the question. They were actually taken to court by their lovely buddies in the European Union. I could not make it up. I thank the Secretary of State for her calm and measured sentiments—I am trying to be measured but I am probably not doing a good job, I must admit—as opposed to the nonsense that we have heard from the Opposition.

Thanks to this Government, on the Isle of Wight, Southern Water is investing tens of millions. I persuaded Southern Water to make the Isle of Wight an example of best practice, through Sandown water works, £2.5 million for Knighton, £5 million for Carisbrooke and £7 million for works in Newport, Cowes and Brading. The full list is extensive. I encourage all Islanders who get the offer of a free water butt from Southern Water to take up that option. As well as improving the pumping stations and replumbing parts of the drainage system, we are providing slow-release water butts and redesigning road surfaces. The improvements that we are making as a pilot scheme and an example of best practice today on the Island will be rolled out everywhere else as part of the integrated water plan, the integrated sewage plan and all the good things that are happening under the Environment Act.

Sally-Ann Hart: My hon. Friend raises the work that Southern Water is doing on the Isle of Wight. We have a Fairlight Pathfinder project on my patch, which will be

rolling out smart water butts that slow down surface water run-off. I am looking forward to seeing how that works.

Bob Seely: Community schemes are a small part of this. People write to me and ask, what can a community scheme do? Hon. Members are right that major investment has to happen, but the first pilot scheme in Britain took place in a beautiful little village called Havenstreet in my patch. On average, Havenstreet pumping station spills 30 times a year—sewage or storm discharge goes into the river 30 times a year. After two thirds of eligible residents took up Southern Water's offer of a free water butt and free installation—no money is exchanged, and Southern Water will never ask for money—the result has been a 70% reduction in water spills. I am putting out letters to every community that can get those butts from Southern Water. I have written to almost all the relevant residents in Gurnard. Letters will go out to Fishbourne and Wootton next, then Freshwater. I encourage them, because the more people who take up the offer of a free water butt, the more successful the scheme.

By improving pumping stations, replumbing parts of the drainage system, providing slow-release butts and redesigning surfaces to make them more porous, we are changing the system for the better. Overall, thanks to the Secretary of State, the Environment Act the sewage plans and the national water plan, we have a positive plan for Britain. Labour is playing catch-up; it offers nothing but second-rate, class-war rhetoric and the politics of abuse and hate. I strongly support the Government's amendment.

3.44 pm

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Good water quality is something that everyone in Southend West takes extremely seriously. Our 1,000-year-old cockle industry and our sea-front businesses, including Sealife Adventure, Adventure Island and Rossi's ice cream parlour, which attract 6 million tourists to our beaches, depend on the quality of our coastal waters. That is why it is so important that we are honest and truthful about the progress that this Conservative Government have made in improving our water quality over the past decade. Frankly, the fearmongering and electioneering we have seen from the Opposition today is shameful.

These are the facts: successive Conservative Governments have increased the percentage of bathing waters classified as good or excellent from 76% in 2010 to 93% now, which is an increase of over 20%. That figure includes every single bathing water in my beautiful constituency and is significantly higher than the European average, which is only 88%.

There is now 80% less phosphorus and 85% less ammonia in our waters than in 1990, when the water companies were privatised. That is why we have an explosion of seals, porpoises and octopuses, and why wrasse is now found off Southend when once it was a rarity. Only two weeks ago, I joined the Environment Agency, Southend Against Sewage and the famous Bluetits Chill Swimmers to test the quality of the water at Chalkwell beach and, once again, found it to be excellent. Hon. Members are welcome to visit at any time.

However, I am not suggesting that we do not have a problem or that any dumping of sewage into our waterways should be condoned; of course it should not. That is why I am proud we have a Government—the first

Government—who have brought in a storm overflows sewage reduction plan and will oversee an investment of £56 billion in modernisation. That is absolutely huge, and more than the entire annual budget of the Scottish Government.

That is also why I am bearing down on my water company all the time. I held a water summit in my patch and brought all the stakeholders together in order to ensure that the chief executive is well aware of the obligations placed on him by the Secretary of State of this Conservative Government. By 30 June, which is in only 10 weeks' time, all of my constituents will know the action plan for each of the storm overflows in my constituency, the number and duration of spills, and, most critically, when improvements will be delivered and when there will be outcomes from the interventions. Those are the actions my constituents want to see happening and they are the actions of a responsible, serious Government.

3.47 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): In Cumbria, it is our privilege to be the stewards not only of the fells and the dales, but of our lakes, rivers and coastal waterways. That is why we are angry about the fact that six out of 10 of the longest spills of sewage in this country in 2022 happened in our county of Cumbria. Sewage was pumped into the River Kent at Staveley for 169 days, into the River Eden at Kirkby Stephen for 101 days and into the River Eea at Cark for 252 days. At Windermere, the centre of the Lake district's tourism and economy, and the largest lake in England, sewage was pumped into the lake or its tributaries for 5,000 hours.

Sewage is discharged not only in Cumbria. As I speak, sewage is being discharged into the River Mole at Esher, which happened 220 times last year. There were 280 spills in Winchester, 750 spills in Lewes, and 2,200 spills in the borough of Stockport. All of these were legal. United Utilities in the north-west is the worst offender because it is situated in the wettest part of England, and therefore storms happen and overflows are permitted more often.

Let us also look at the situation with regard to bathing water, which we have heard many people talk about today, and the way it ensures higher water quality. We bid for bathing water status for Coniston Water and the River Kent, but we were turned down, despite those being more popular bathing sites than many places where that status was granted. I have heard what Government Members have said about monitoring, but in 2021 12% of the monitoring stations were faulty and 16% were faulty last year, so what we know is probably an underestimate of the state of the problem.

We have talked about legal dumping of sewage, but what about illegal dumping? In 2021 and 2022, there were 827 offences and illegal dumps of sewage. How many of those 827 were prosecuted? Just 16, which means that this Government have effectively decriminalised the dumping of sewage in our rivers, lakes and coastal waterways. Water companies know that that will happen and factor in the fines, because it is cheaper to pay them than to invest in the infrastructure. Since privatisation, £65.9 billion has been paid out in water company dividends. There was a 20% increase in executive pay last year. We hear the Government saying that the polluter should pay. Yes, the polluters pay: they pay themselves massive bonuses.

[Tim Farron]

In Cumbria and across the country, we are outraged. It is not just about the threat to the biodiversity of our lakes and rivers, to our fish stocks, to those who swim, to our pets using our waterways and to the tourism economy that underpins the Lake district. It is also about the deep injustice that large corporations are raking in enormous profits, while this Government are doing nothing to stop them pumping sewage into the waterways that we value so dearly in Cumbria and elsewhere.

3.50 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I will start on a positive note by thanking those who have actively engaged in this public health, environmental and economic issue, which has been an absolute catastrophe for our country. I thank my friend Feargal Sharkey, the singer turned formidable environmental campaigner, for his tireless work in bringing to life the impact that sewage dumping is having on every part of our country. It is also important to recognise the work of the campaign group Top of the Poops, alongside Surfers Against Sewage, in collating constituency data to allow the public to see the extent of the Tory sewage scandal in the areas where they live, work and holiday.

Opposition Members have made some extremely powerful speeches illustrating the impact of the sewage scandal in their constituencies. My hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) made a good point about excessive corporate pay. My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) spoke about the effect on the biodiversity of our birds and fish. My hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) pointed out that bills have gone up by 40%.

Bob Seely: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alex Sobel: Unfortunately we have limited time, so I will make some progress.

My hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) rightly highlighted the importance of the unique habitats that chalk streams provide. My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) pointed out that we need increased regulation that is good for people. My hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) and other north-west Members rightly pointed out that United Utilities has the highest number of discharges. My hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon) pointed out that constituents have suffered heavily because of overflows in her constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who is a keen wild swimmer, has been an excellent campaigner for Plymouth sound to get clean bathing water status. I hope his campaign comes to fruition. My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) pointed out that the Government have a 27-year plan. Who can wait that long for our rivers to be clean? My hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) represents Whitstable beach, where I have swum. She pointed out that swimmers can no longer use it because of the sewage.

My hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) pointed out that United Utilities uses the courts to protect itself from private prosecution,

which is exactly why our Bill is needed. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker) pointed out the danger that sewage poses to the ambitious plans of our metro Mayors. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) told the House about the horrendous 17-hour spill just outside Reading. Our Bill would end such incidents. My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) rightly mentioned sustainable drainage systems and grey-water storage as part of the solution. There have been so many excellent speeches today.

We have to ask ourselves some questions. Is the water industry operating in the public interest? No. Is it right for the Tories to allow water companies to dump raw sewage into our waters? No. Is it time for change? Yes. Of course, we cannot and will not just let water companies off the hook. We should not allow them to wash their hands of the issue and walk off the pitch with £72 billion in dividends, leaving behind a broken system.

Bob Seely *rose*—

Alex Sobel: I give way to the hon. Gentleman, with whom I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine.

Bob Seely: Earlier today, the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) made a truly dire attempt at public speaking in which he avoided most of the questions put to him. One of the critical questions was why the last Labour Government allowed the utility firms to self-monitor. Does that not exemplify an uncomfortable, corrupting relationship between the last Labour Government and the public utilities?

Alex Sobel: When Labour left office in 2010, the Environment Agency said that our rivers were the cleanest at any time since before the industrial revolution. That is Labour's record.

It should not be left to us or to the public to clean up the mess and pay the price of Tory failure, but we will have to do it. Conservative Members have made the argument that that will involve households picking up the tab. It will not. Our plan, unlike the Government's, does not require increasing taxpayers' bills.

As was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), in the absence of a credible plan, Labour has done the Secretary of State's job for her in presenting its own oven-ready plan: to deliver the mandatory monitoring of all sewage outlets and a standing-charge penalty for all water companies that do not have properly functioning monitors in place; to deliver automatic fines on polluters, which is not happening under this Government; to give regulators the necessary power and require them to enforce the rules properly; to set legally binding sewage-dumping reduction targets that will end the Tory sewage scandal by 2030 and not 2050; and crucially, to ensure that any failure to improve is paid for by water companies, which will not be able to pass the charge on to customers' bills or slash investment.

What we have set out in my hon. Friend's Bill is just the first phase of Labour's plan to clear up the mess, but we are under no illusions: the system is fundamentally broken. That is why we need a phase 2 plan—which we will set out in due course—to reform the sector, placing delivery for the public good at the heart of the water

industry. There needs to be a greater degree of public oversight in the running of the water industry to protect the public interest, because under the Tories, households are paying the price of a failing water industry, through first having to pay for sewage treatment in their water bills while the Tories allow corner-cutting and the dumping of raw sewage in our waters rather than its being treated properly. I recently discovered that only 37% of our sewage treatment plants even have storage tanks, while the others discharge straight into the local rivers, and even the simplest precautions are not being taken in the majority of our sewage plants—

Duncan Baker: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alex Sobel: I think that time is against us—yes, you are indicating that it is, Madam Deputy Speaker—so unfortunately I cannot take any more interventions.

Secondly, households are paying the price of the impact that this is having on the NHS, the economy and the environment. I am disappointed but not surprised at the conduct of Tory Members who, once again, stood up one after the other and merely read out the cobbled-together lines of the panicked Government Whips—*[Interruption.]* That is not true! I wrote this speech myself, thank you very much. The Government Whips are struggling to find any serious reasons for blocking Labour's common-sense approach. Being forced to resort to that is a symptom of a Tory Government who have run out of road and of ideas.

It is unfortunate, and slightly embarrassing for them, that the Government Whips have misunderstood Labour's plan, fed Tory Members inaccurate numbers and got their maths wrong, which is no surprise given the state of our economy. The Minister may wish to correct the record on their behalf, because if they had read the Bill they would have seen that there are safeguards that prevent anyone from gaming the system. In any case, the Government's own economic regulator, Ofwat, already has the power to protect customers' bills.

The Secretary of State's own Department has undertaken a cost-benefit analysis of Labour's plan, which shows that cleaning up this mess would cost water companies a fraction of the £72 billion that they have taken out in dividends. There is no reason for inaction—and how much is that inaction costing the NHS, and businesses that are forced to pull down the shutters because of sewage dumping? But with the Tories, there is always a reason not to act in the public interest, and nothing is ever their fault. Bluster, blame game and blocking measures to clean up their mass sewage dumping mess—you name it, they have blamed it, as I have heard throughout the afternoon, whether it is people who use their toilets, the Welsh Government or home drainage systems. The Secretary of State even blamed the Victorians for causing this mess, more than 100 years ago. In case they have forgotten, let me point out that it is the Tories in Westminster who are responsible for economic regulation of the water industry in England and Wales, with the levers of power that are key to improving industry performance and holding water companies to account.

Tory Members now have a second chance to do the right thing, having previously voted to continue sewage dumping. If they vote with Labour today, we can end the sewage scandal once and for all. Their alternative is

simply to follow the lead by continuing to vote for sewage dumping for no good reason. If they do refuse to back our plan, it will be either because they have not bothered to read the Bill and are blindly following the direction of the Secretary of State, or because they do not understand the Bill and, as their contributions today suggest, are inadvertently misleading the House about the reasons for continuing to vote for sewage dumping.

Let me be clear: the public are watching and listening. The choice this evening is simple. Members can either vote for our plan to end the Tory sewage scandal by 2030, with water companies finally being made to do the job that households are already paying them to do, or they can, for a second time, vote to allow the dumping of raw sewage in the constituencies that we all represent.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I now call the Minister, and remind the House that the Front Benchers can speak for equal amounts of time when winding up the debate.

3.58 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): The debate provides a welcome and much-needed opportunity to set the record straight on sewage and what the Government are doing. Not only are we taking this issue extremely seriously, but we are and have been acting. We have a realistic, costed plan to clean up our network of rivers and coasts, and it is already in operation—and what a tide of positivity we have heard from the Conservative Benches today.

There is general consensus among all our colleagues that this Government have a pragmatic, practical, costed, reliable and comprehensive plan. Those words have been used by all colleagues, and we are all pulling together to understand this issue. Those colleagues included my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald), my hon. Friends the Members for Keighley (Robbie Moore), for St Ives (Derek Thomas), for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), for Gedling (Tom Randall), for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory), for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart), for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) and for Ashfield (Lee Anderson)—plain speaking, as ever—as well as my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra), my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) with her wonderful adaptive surfing centre, my hon. Friends the Members for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes) and for North West Norfolk (James Wild) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), who systematically unpicked the Labour party's plan by himself.

Following today's debate, I cannot help but feel that for the Opposition this is nothing but a political game to fire up those outside this place with a view to making some sort of gain. Labour's plan is completely superfluous. Where have Labour Members been? We are doing all these things they are asking for, and more. It was this Government who uncovered the scandal of storm sewage overflows being used far too frequently, because it was this party that increased the monitoring of storm sewage overflows. We have ramped it up from a paltry 7% under Labour to 91% now, and it will be 100% by the end of

[Rebecca Pow]

the year. It was also the Labour Government who were taken to court for pollution, so where the idea of all those clean rivers comes from, I do not know.

What did we discover from all our monitoring? We discovered that water companies were indeed using storm sewage overflows far too frequently, and that is completely unacceptable. So what did we do? We acted. We brought in the Environment Act 2021 to require a new storm overflow discharge reduction plan, fully costed and with a clear impact assessment, delivering up to £56 billion of capital investment to revolutionise our Victorian infrastructure. We are consulting on lifting the cap on fines entirely so that the Environment Agency can issue potentially unlimited penalties on water companies, in addition to Ofwat's existing powers to fine companies up to 10% of annual turnover.

Ofwat has strengthened its powers on executive pay awards so that if water companies want to pay bonuses even if environmental performance is found wanting, their shareholders must pay for that, not their customers. Through the new water restoration fund, money collected through fines will be spent on improving water quality. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) needs to get with the programme: we have already done what he asked. Our Treasury friends who sit here agreed to it. We are also bringing in new monitoring requirements under the Environment Act for near real-time reporting on storm overflows. My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth asked if we could do more. Yes; we are going to increase water quality monitoring upstream and downstream.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

Rebecca Pow: I am not going to give way, because there simply is not time.

I note that the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) likes our monitoring ideas in the Environment Act so much that he has put our monitoring framework from the Act into clause 1 of his Bill. Marvellous! We also recently published our integrated plan for water. This includes an announcement that we are accelerating £1.6 billion of investment in reducing storm overflow discharges, upgrading wastewater treatment works and bringing in measures to improve drought resilience. The whole issue is extremely complicated, and that is why I made this a priority when I came into the Department. Our plan for water sets out how we will deliver the improvements we need across all matters connected to water, including all forms of pollution.

I ask people to remember that no Conservative Member has ever voted to allow raw sewage into our rivers. We voted for measures to clean up our rivers, and the Opposition voted against them. We have produced much cleaner water since Victorian times. We have almost the highest-quality drinking water in the world, and 93% of our bathing waters are excellent.

How could we take Labour's suggestions on sewage seriously? Labour's plans would potentially require enough pipes to be dug up from our roads to go around the globe two and a half times. Can anyone imagine the disruption that would cause, not to mention that it is totally impractical? We have heard no clear indication

of how Labour's plan would be paid for. Would it be added to customers' bills? The shadow Minister could not answer that question on Sky this morning, and I did not hear the answer this afternoon. As for the Lib Dems, it is really not worth commenting on what they say.

The scale of this Government's ambition cannot be highlighted enough, and I urge all colleagues to support the Government's amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We will vote first on the Government's amendment, because the amendment simply deletes wording. Should the amendment be made, I anticipate that there will be a second vote on the main Question. That is unlike the second debate today, for which the amendment also adds substance and therefore the Question on the Opposition wording will be put first. Did you all get that? Turn your papers over and begin.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 290, Noes 188.

Division No. 217]

[4.6 pm]

AYES

Adams, rh Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afrjye, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Argar, rh Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Badenoch, rh Kemi
Bailey, Shaun
Baker, Duncan
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Benton, Scott
Beresford, Sir Paul
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Burghart, Alex
Butler, Rob
Cairns, rh Alun
Carter, Andy
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex

Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Simon
Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, Claire
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Daly, James
Davies, rh David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh Mr David
Davison, Dehenna
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dines, Miss Sarah
Docherty, Leo
Donelan, rh Michelle (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Double, Steve
Dowden, rh Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, Sir James
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael

Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg

Knight, Julian (*Proxy vote cast by Craig Mackinlay*)
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, rh Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola

Richardson, Angela
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek

Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David (*Proxy vote cast by Craig Mackinlay*)
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Whately, Helen
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggins, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Ayes:

Robert Largan and
 Fay Jones

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Barker, Paula
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Sir Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Clark, Feryal (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Coyle, Neil
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon

Cryer, John
 Daby, Janet
 Dalton, Ashley
 Davey, rh Ed
 David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Debonnaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farron, Tim
 Farry, Stephen
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Foord, Richard
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Furniss, Gill
 Gill, Preet Kaur

Glindon, Mary
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Lloyd, Tony (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Lockhart, Carla
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame

Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Reed, Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robinson, Gavin
 Rodda, Matt
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Shannon, Jim
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeting, Wes
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Winter, Beth
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
 Navendu Mishra and
 Gerald Jones

Division No. 218]

Adams, rh Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, rh Kerni
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baker, Duncan
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Daly, James
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinene, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Docherty, Leo

[4.22 pm

AYES

Donelan, rh Michelle (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, rh John
 Gove, rh Michael
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, rh James
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I remind Members that they really should follow their voices; I do not want to see a zero at the end of the vote.

The House divided: Ayes 286, Noes 0.

Holmes, Paul
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnston, David
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian (*Proxy vote cast by Craig Mackinlay*)
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherylyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, rh Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel

Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane

Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben

Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David (*Proxy vote cast by Craig Mackinlay*)
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Whately, Helen
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Ayes:
Robert Largan and
Fay Jones

NOES

Tellers for the Noes:

Gareth Johnson and
Sir Robert Goodwill

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls on the Government to set a target for the reduction of sewage discharges, to provide for financial penalties in relation to sewage discharges and breaches of monitoring requirements, and to carry out an impact assessment of sewage discharges.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. A little while ago, when Peter Tatchell came to visit me, he had a badge confiscated from him—a campaigning badge against homophobia. I subsequently received a letter of apology from the Serjeant at Arms saying that he would look at that practice. Yesterday, some other people came to visit me. They had a series of leaflets about the Chinese Government's treatment of Jimmy Lai, and those were confiscated too. There may well be a well-intentioned purpose behind this, but will the House authorities look at the operation of these rules, because it seems very odd that it is illegal to bring political material into the House of Commons.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the right hon. Member for his point of order. I will raise this issue with the Serjeant at Arms tomorrow, and I will get back in touch with him.

Cost of Living Increases

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

4.34 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House condemns successive Conservative Governments for their mismanagement of the economy over 13 years; regrets that this has resulted in the UK being the only G7 economy that is still smaller than before the pandemic, with squeezed wages and higher mortgage rates that have increased costs by £500 a month for some households; further regrets that successive Chancellors have made working people pay for the Government's economic failure with 24 tax rises since 2019, creating the highest tax burden in 70 years, while refusing to abolish the non-domicile tax loophole; is extremely concerned about the impact on household budgets of an inflation rate of more than 10 per cent with food prices rising at their fastest rate in 45 years; therefore calls on the Government to ease the cost of living crisis by freezing council tax this year, paid for by an extended windfall tax on oil and gas company profits; further calls on the Government to cut business rates for small businesses and support energy intensive industries including food manufacturers with their energy bills to help bring down the cost of everyday items; and finally calls on the Government to adopt Labour's economic mission to secure the highest sustained growth in the G7 with good jobs in every part of the country.

It astonishes me that the Conservatives are acting like the cost of living crisis is over and their economic plan is working. The Chancellor is proudly boasting that Britain is back. He has even said:

"The declinists are wrong and the optimists are right. We stick to the plan because the plan is working."—[*Official Report*, 15 March 2023; Vol. 729, c. 847.]

What planet does the Chancellor live on? Does he understand the reality on the ground for all of our constituents? Does he understand that on the Prime Minister's watch, our economy is weaker, with the UK forecast to have the worst growth in the G7 this year? Real wages are lower than they were 15 years ago, with families in the UK going into the cost of living crisis significantly poorer than those in comparable European countries. The price of everyday essentials has risen by an eye-watering £3,000 since 2020, and never before have people in this country paid so much money for so little value from their public services.

The disconnect between this Conservative fantasy and the experiences of ordinary people could not be wider. Decent, hard-working people across the country are being forced to cut back on the things that underpin a good life. Mr Deputy Speaker, I will explain what I mean by a good life: a meal out once in a while with close friends, the special annual family holiday that you look forward to all year round, and a decent home to call your own. Those are increasingly things of the past; instead, people are left worrying about how they are going to pay their household bills at the end of the month and their rocketing mortgage costs.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for opening her speech in such a powerful way. Does she agree that it is really worrying that we hear tales of parents going without a meal, just to make sure that their children are able to eat?

Tulip Siddiq: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. She is a doughty champion for the children from deprived families who live in her constituency. We have surgeries where people line up to speak to us who cannot afford to eat because, as my hon. Friend says, they are saving their money to buy one meal for their children. This is Britain in 2023. We should not be in this situation.

It is important to remember how we got here in the first place. The Government have mishandled the cost of living crisis at every turn. Indeed, we will never forget the Conservatives crashing the economy last year, and we will never forgive them for it.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The hon. Lady is totally right about the perverse choices that people are having to make. A young mum in Abingdon who has her kids in childcare is having to decide whether she pays the debt that she owes to the childcare provider, pays her prescription charges, or buys food for herself and her children. How is that a country that we can be proud of? It is because the Conservatives mismanaged the economy, is it not?

Tulip Siddiq: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. She has outlined lots of situations that we hear about every day from our constituents, yet the Conservatives say that their economic plan is working—it is clearly not working. The resulting rise in interest rates and the economic instability have added £500 a month to first-time buyers' bills. For too many, dreams of home ownership and starting a family have been destroyed—another pillar of the good life knocked away.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point to the Chancellor's suggestion that the Government are the optimists and we are the declinists. In fact, are the optimists not those people who have taken on a mortgage and achieved that dream of home ownership, and who are being so cruelly let down by the incompetence of this Government?

Tulip Siddiq: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have to ask the Conservatives how they can continue to live in this fantasy world, because it does not match the reality on the ground. Let us not forget the impact of rising prices. Food prices are growing 50% faster than anywhere else in the G7, putting Britain's food inflation rate at 19.2%, compared with an average of 12.8%. The price of sugar is up by an incredible 42%. Milk is up by more than 33%, and pasta is up by 25%. The UK has the highest inflation level in western Europe. That is a national scandal.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): The hon. Lady says that the inflation figures here are higher than anywhere else in the G7. Food price inflation in Germany is over 22%, compared with 17% in the UK. Is that also the fault of the Conservative Government?

Tulip Siddiq: I assume that the hon. Gentleman is not proud of all the figures I am outlining and the high inflation that is coming up. The Conservatives can manipulate the stats all they want, but they cannot run away from the fact that we are falling behind our peers. That is not something I am proud of, and they should not be either.

Since 2020, the cost of a typical food shop is up by £700 a year. Clothing and footwear are up by £140. Household goods and services are up by £360. Transport is up by £800. *[Interruption.]* I do not know why Government Members are laughing; these are real figures that our constituents are dealing with. The essentials of housing, fuel and power are up by a shocking £1,480.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): Is the hon. Lady aware that the Government have subsidised people's energy bills by about 50%, and if so, by how much would Labour subsidise them?

Tulip Siddiq: I will come to energy shortly. If the hon. Member were able to answer, I would ask him whether he thinks 50% is enough, because it is not enough. If he speaks to people on the ground, he will see how much they are struggling. The rising costs of everyday essentials mean that families across the country are making cutbacks just to stay afloat. That has been devastating for local economies, with communities losing the businesses and institutions that bind us together.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a fact that the village of Altnaharra in my constituency is every year the coldest place in the entire United Kingdom. We already have pensioners having to make the invidious decision to wrap themselves up in blankets and put the heating off. No one should face that sort of decision.

Tulip Siddiq: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. The situations being described are not what we want to hear about in our country in 2023, and we should not be proud of this record; we should be trying to do better.

Under this Government, more than 6,000 pubs, nearly 4,000 local shops and 9,000 bank branches have closed on our local high streets. That is nothing to be proud of.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech, and I am sure we have all been concerned by stories from our constituents who are missing out on meals, eating out-of-date food or unable to clean their clothes as often as they want. Does she share my concern that that is having a devastating impact on the development of young children in the early years? We need to know that those children are fed and have heating.

Tulip Siddiq: My hon. Friend is always fighting for her constituents, and she is absolutely right. As someone who was on the shadow Education team before I came to this role, I know that if our young children are not fed or looked after properly, they will not fulfil their potential in this country. We should be looking at the future generations, and the Government are ignoring them.

The Government's mishandling of the cost of living crisis is just another chapter in the long story of 13 years of economic failure. More than a decade of Conservative rule has seen our country fall behind as the British economy has experienced low growth, rock-bottom productivity rates and chronic under-investment.

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important speech. I find it deeply offensive that Conservative Members are laughing at

some of these statistics. That just shows how out of touch they are with the reality of life for so many people across this country. Does she agree that it is an absolute travesty in 2023 that we have families where children are having to share beds, sleep on the floor or sleep in the bathtub because people cannot afford to move house, to pay their rent and to pay for food for their families? That is not a laughing matter.

Tulip Siddiq: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. Having campaigned in her constituency, I know there are huge levels of poverty in certain places. Someone from the back said that we are lucky here because we are MPs and get paid a decent salary. We certainly should not be laughing at people who are struggling to make ends meet.

I remind the House that, when Labour was in government, real GDP growth averaged 2%. If growth had continued at the same rate under this Tory Government, we would have £40 billion more to spend on our public services, without having to raise a single tax. Instead, a lack of strategic policy making, economic uncertainty and the absence of an industrial strategy mean that the UK is going through the slowest economic recovery in the G7.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): The hon. Lady is asserting that the UK economy has fallen behind since 2010. Does she recognise the figures that show that this country has actually grown faster than Italy, Japan and France since 2010 to date and that, since 2016—since the Brexit vote—it has grown at about the same pace as Germany?

Tulip Siddiq: The Conservatives can manipulate the stats as much as they want, but they cannot run away from the fact that we are falling behind our peers. *[Laughter.]* I do not care how much Conservative Members want to laugh; I know that is the truth. It is families who are bearing the brunt of the low growth. A decade of stagnant wages has left the British people highly exposed to rising prices. If the hon. Member who just intervened can dispute this figure, he is welcome to intervene again: the average French and German family are now 10% and 19% richer than their respective British counterparts. If we continue down this path of managed decline and our growth rate stays where it has been over the past decade, families in the UK will be poorer than those in Poland by 2030 and poorer than those in Hungary and Romania by 2040. I see the hon. Member—

Jerome Mayhew *rose*—

Tulip Siddiq: Yes, please.

Jerome Mayhew: It is a great pleasure to be given the role of the Opposition spokesman from the Back Benches here, but there is a difference between economic data that is factual, has happened and can be verified, and straight-line projections of the future between now and 2030 that have not happened and will not happen.

Tulip Siddiq: As I figured, the hon. Member did not have a response to the question I asked. If we do not break with the Tories' failed economic model, the necessary underpinnings of a good life—as I have mentioned, fair wages, secure work, a decent home—will be further eroded.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Lady is making a powerful case and making a salient point. Does she agree that the constituents she has already mentioned, who are dealing with all these price hikes—the worst in 45 years—and who come to our constituency offices every week, do not care that we grew faster than Italy in 2010, but they care that they cannot heat their homes now and cannot feed their children and they are worried about their elderly parents? The blame can be laid at nobody's door but this Conservative Government's.

Tulip Siddiq: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. She is absolutely right. This Conservative fantasy just does not match up to the reality on the ground.

Instead of putting forward a comprehensive plan for growth, successive Conservative Chancellors have made hard-working families pay for their economic failure. The Conservatives have become the party of tax rises for the hard-working majority. Since 2019, the British people have been hit with 24 tax rises. It is the highest tax burden in 70 years. Earlier this month, we saw council tax bills rise above £2,000—some Members might think that is funny; it is not funny for my constituents—for the first time, as the Chancellor effectively forced councils to put up rates by reducing their funding. That saw families who were already struggling hit with an additional average tax hike of 5.1%—[*Interruption.*] If Conservative Members have something to say, instead of chuntering from a sedentary position, they should intervene. They should not shout from the front.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Tulip Siddiq: With pleasure.

Simon Baynes: Earlier, the hon. Lady mentioned fair work. Does she agree that the rise in unemployment under the last Labour Government from 2.1 million to 2.5 million, and the 45% increase in youth unemployment, is far removed from fair work?

Tulip Siddiq: May I remind the hon. Gentleman that the last Labour Government introduced the first minimum wage, slashed child poverty and slashed pensioner poverty because we grew the economy—something this Government have failed to do?

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech and outlining exactly what Labour did in government to make a difference for working people. In Labour-led Wales, where the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes) is also an MP, we have just increased the education maintenance allowance, which was scrapped in England, to give students the opportunity not to have to choose between buying books and going to school, and having to find a job to support themselves.

Tulip Siddiq: I hope hon. Members hear that before they start criticising any sort of Labour Government.

Things are only set to get worse. The Government's stealth tax and freeze on income tax and national insurance contribution thresholds will, according to the Resolution Foundation, cost households £25 billion a year by 2027-28.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Tulip Siddiq: Not now, as I want to make some progress. At the same time, the Chancellor has given the 1% wealthiest pension savers a £1 billion handout, and he has continued to defend the indefensible: the non-domicile tax loophole. Instead of growing the economy and boosting wages, the Conservatives have resorted to hammering ordinary people with tax rises. It is time for a radically different approach.

Paul Bristow: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Tulip Siddiq: I will make a bit of progress. We need a bold plan for growth that confronts the problems of the UK's declining economy head on. That is why the Government must adopt Labour's mission to secure the highest sustained growth in the G7, with job creation and productivity growth in every part of the country, making everyone, not just a few, better off. That may seem ambitious, but Britain has so much potential.

Dr Luke Evans: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Tulip Siddiq: I will give way one more time.

Dr Evans: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. The motion says that Labour will extend the windfall tax on oil and gas companies and

"further calls on the Government to cut business rates for small businesses".

What values would the Labour Opposition propose?

Tulip Siddiq: I am just about to come to the part of my speech about the windfall tax and business rates, so if the hon. Gentleman listens carefully, he will hear. The talents and efforts of working people and British businesses mean that we lead the way in financial and legal services, and the tech and life sciences sectors. With a proper industrial strategy, the UK economy will not just lead the pack again, but communities written off by the Conservatives will have the backing they need to make their full contribution to our great nation. Labour will achieve that by forging a new covenant between Government and industry, bringing in public investment through our green prosperity plan to support new industries. That will include investment in areas such as fuel cell manufacturing, nuclear, hydrogen and home insulation to bring down energy prices and create well-paid jobs in the industries of the future across the UK, while fixing the holes in the Brexit deal and bringing in a proper supply chain strategy will help to tackle inflation and build the resilient trading economy we need to get ahead.

Labour will work in partnership with businesses to help people get the skills and opportunities they need. We will not leave potential untapped. We will fix the apprenticeship levy, improve local employment services and help first-time buyers get on the housing ladder through a comprehensive mortgage guarantee scheme to boost local living standards. Only Labour, through our plan to grow the economy, will create the conditions for a good life in every part of the country. We will create well-paid jobs, bring home ownership back within reach for young families and ensure that the NHS delivers for all.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Tulip Siddiq: The hon. Member may want to sit down and hear the next bit because I am sure he is going to ask the same question.

However, we also recognise that people need help today. That is why, if Labour were in government today, we would freeze council tax this year to stop bills from rising above £2,000, paid for by an extended windfall tax on oil and gas company profits. Even though Office for National Statistics figures confirm that 2022 was a record year for North sea oil and gas profits—even though the ONS confirmed that—the Conservatives are again choosing to protect the energy giants' windfalls of war.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Tulip Siddiq: I think the hon. Gentleman should listen, actually.

By refusing to backdate the tax to January 2022, end the investment allowance tax loophole and raise the rate in line with other countries, the Chancellor has left billions on the table, leaving working people to pick up the rising council tax bill. Labour would use the additional funds raised by a proper windfall tax to cut energy bills for domestic food manufacturers and processors, and we would cut business rates for small shops, paid for by properly taxing online giants, to bring down the eyewatering cost of everyday items. We would also reverse the Conservative decision to hand the 1% wealthiest pension savers a £1 billion handout and instead introduce specific measures to keep doctors in work. And we would close the non-dom tax loophole, so people who live and work here pay their tax here. We would use that money to fund one of the biggest expansions of the NHS workforce in history. Those are straightforward measures. The Government could introduce them today to show people they are on their side, but we know they will not because they have given up on Britain.

At the heart of today's Opposition day debate is a simple question that everyone up and down the country will be asking themselves: "After 13 years of Conservative rule, am I better off?" The simple answer is no. People now have a clear choice: between a tired Conservative Government out of ideas, and a Labour party committed to forging a new partnership with British business to create good jobs and boost wages; between a Conservative Party that puts developers before first-time buyers, and a Labour party committed to the principle of home ownership and giving young families a start in life; and between the Conservatives, the party of high taxation and Government handouts to the wealthiest 1%, and Labour, the party committed to putting working people and businesses first, freezing council tax and cutting business rates to ease the cost of living. Only the Labour party has a serious plan for growth to improve living standards and wages for working people. *[Interruption.]* Those on the Conservative Benches can laugh all they want, but only the Labour party has a vision of a better life for the British people.

4.58 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from "House" to the end of the Question and add:

"welcomes the Government's action to halve inflation, grow the economy and reduce debt; supports the Government's extensive efforts to support families up and down the country with the cost

of living through significant support to help with rising prices, worth an average of £3,300 per household including direct cash payments of at least £900 to the eight million most vulnerable households; notes the use of a windfall tax on energy firm's profits to pay around half of the typical family's energy bill through the Energy Price Guarantee, also notes the fact that the Government has frozen fuel duty for 13 consecutive years to support motorists; welcomes the expansion of free childcare to all eligible parents of children aged nine months to four years old; and notes that Labour will fail to grip inflation or boost economic growth, with their plans for the economy simply leading to unfunded spending, higher debt and uncontrolled migration."

Even in times of economic challenge, this is a Government who prioritise helping families face down the cost of living. I think Members across all sides of the House recognise that having come through the covid crisis, families and businesses across the country have felt additional global headwinds. After two decades of low inflation, the world has been confronted with fast-growing prices. We are not alone. While we tackle this, our friends in Ukraine are at war and we are supporting them diplomatically, militarily and economically. We have faced down those challenges while supporting our economy and, because of the action we took, we avoided a recession. Our sensible, credible economic plan is working. The International Monetary Fund said we are on the right track, unemployment remains very low by historic standards, and measures in the spring Budget deliver the largest permanent increase in potential GDP that the Office for Budget Responsibility has ever scored in a medium-term forecast, as a result of Government policy.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I realise that this will bring back painful memories for the right hon. Gentleman, but he may recall that the previous Prime Minister crashed the economy. The UK has been uniquely impacted. The issues with Ukraine and covid are impacting the rest of the world, but they are impacting the UK in a slightly different way because of the previous Prime Minister's actions. I know that the right hon. Gentleman wishes to erase all memory of that, but he must acknowledge that her actions have had a consequence, and the British taxpayer is still paying the price.

John Glen: I value all my colleagues. The previous Prime Minister's insights into the growth imperative in this economy were right.

Paul Bristow: Could my right hon. Friend help me? Some of the faces on the Opposition Benches seem so glum because we have avoided a recession—could he explain why?

John Glen: My hon. Friend is right. I approach the job of government with a sense of humility about the challenge we face.

I recognise that we have made significant progress in recent months—that has been generally acknowledged. I will now set out where else we will make progress. Although it is welcome that wholesale energy prices have been falling, many families remain under significant pressure. The Government understand that. Food prices are contributing to headline inflation. Rising food prices, however, are not a unique issue to the UK, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston) pointed out. It is a problem that advanced economies are facing. For example, as he correctly pointed out, in Germany,

[John Glen]

food price inflation is above 22%. We are fully alive to the fact that some people remain in real distress. I want to assure Members and their constituents that we will always stand ready to help where we can.

Dr Luke Evans: Is it not about compassion in government? That is why pensioners on a fixed income and people on benefits will receive a 10% increase. Also, the fourth iteration of the household support fund is there directly to help the most vulnerable to get through those tough times.

John Glen: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In a moment I will set out exactly what interventions we have made and how we are continuing to intervene to support the most vulnerable in our communities across the United Kingdom.

The best thing we can do to help people's money go further is to deliver on our plan to halve inflation and grow the economy. In doing so, we will meet the Prime Minister's five pledges to the British people. Three of those are economic—two of which I have mentioned—and reflect people's priorities. Inflation makes us all poorer. It has to be tackled head-on, which is why, working closely with the Bank of England, we are bearing down on it. We are also growing the economy.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Minister confirm the IMF figures that in 2020 to 2022—that important three-year period after we left the EU—the UK was the fastest growing economy of the G7? The Opposition's forecast that the UK might be a poorer performer this year is just a forecast, and most forecasts are usually wrong.

John Glen: As always, my right hon. Friend is on the money. The point is that forecasts predict many different things. I have been in the Treasury for nearly five years; forecasts for every fiscal event rarely prove to be true at the next fiscal event.

We must continue to focus on taking the right decisions, decision by decision, and prove those forecasters wrong. That means long-term, sustainable and healthy growth that pays for our NHS and schools, finds jobs for young people and provides a safety net for older people, all while making our country one of the most prosperous in the world. It also means reducing debt, which we are on track to do. In fact, because of the decisions we have taken and the improved outlook for the public finances, underlying debt in five years' time is now forecast to be nearly three percentage points lower than back in the autumn. That means more money for our public services and a lower burden on future generations—deeply held Conservative values, which we put into practice today. It is these steps that will make our country and our people better off. We are also taking action to shelter the most vulnerable while we achieve these longer-term ambitions for the economy.

In the Budget, we announced that the energy price guarantee would remain at £2,500 per year until July 2023. That was funded in part by the energy profits levy that this Government introduced last year, recognising that profit levels in the sector had increased significantly due to very high oil and gas prices caused by global circumstances, including of course Russia's invasion of

Ukraine. The levy is expected to raise just under £26 billion between 2022-23 and 2027-28, on top of around £25 billion in tax receipts from the sector in the same period through the permanent tax regime. The energy price guarantee measure will save the average family a further £160 on top of the energy support measures already announced, bringing total Government support for energy bills to £1,500 for the typical household since October 2022.

It is worth recapping those measures. This Government have helped all domestic electricity customers with £400 off their energy bills through the energy bills support scheme. The energy bills support scheme alternative funding provides £400 to around 900,000 households that are not supplied by domestic electricity contracts and are unable to receive support automatically through the energy bills support scheme.

Our support has not stopped there. Alongside holding down energy bills, freezing fuel duty and increasing universal credit, we are giving up to £900 in cost of living payments to households on means-tested benefits. Starting from today, over 8 million families across the UK will receive the first £301 cost of living payment from the Government. That is the first of up to three payments for those on means-tested benefits, totalling £900 through 2023-24. Those entitled do not need to apply for the payment or do anything to receive it. The payments will be accompanied by a payment of £150 for people on eligible disability benefits this summer and a payment of £300 on top of winter fuel payments for pensioners at the end of 2023.

These are carefully designed interventions, targeted at the most vulnerable across communities in the United Kingdom. The latest payment follows on from the £650 cost of living payment delivered to households on means-tested benefits by the Government in 2022, with an additional £150 for individuals on disability benefits and £300 for pensioner households.

The Government of course need to recognise that some people will fall into difficulties. They have enabled local authorities to provide additional support with the cost of household essentials through a 12-month extension to the household support fund in England worth £1 billion, including Barnett funding. We are also ensuring that more than 10 million working-age families will see an increase in their benefit payments from April 2023, based on the September inflation figure of 10.1%.

While we shelter the most vulnerable, the public also rightly expect us to look further to the future, making sure we are taking steps to grow sustainably and securely in the long term. This Government are unashamedly pro-growth, because expanding the productive capacity of the economy is the only way to solve the productivity puzzle, which has dogged us for decades, and improve living standards for all.

One reason we are held back is because a great number of people have left the labour market altogether. As a Conservative, I believe there is virtue in work and getting people into work is the best way to avoid the ills and perils of poverty. There has been an increase of more than 1.5 million working households since 2010, which shows that we are on the side of working families. That includes our new game-changing childcare offer that will entitle working parents in England to 30 hours of free childcare per week, once their child is nine months old, and close the gap between parental leave ending and the current childcare offer.

In addition to making provision on free childcare, the Budget set out to remove barriers for the long-term sick and disabled, for jobseekers and for older people with our pension tax reforms. Part of the plan is welfare reform to support those who have been disengaged from the labour market. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has introduced a White Paper setting out reforms that will support more people who are long-term sick or disabled to try work without any fear of losing their benefits. Other policies that we announced at the Budget will then ensure that those individuals are better supported to stay and succeed in work. Overall, the Office for Budget Responsibility expects the spring Budget package to result in 110,000 more individuals in the labour market by the end of the forecast period.

The UK saw the fastest growth in the G7 over 2021 and 2022. Cumulative growth over the 2022 to 2024 period is predicted to be higher than that of Germany or Japan, and at a similar rate to that of France or the US. We have halved unemployment, cut inequality and reduced the number of workless households by 1 million. We have protected pensioners, those on low incomes and those with disabilities. We are continuing to lay the groundwork for a vibrant, innovative and growing economy that benefits communities and families up and down the country.

Having sat and listened to the shadow Minister—I was not smiling, but reflecting on what I heard—I think it is very unfortunate that the Labour party continues to play politics and snipe from the sidelines without a clear and coherent plan.

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): I notice that the Opposition motion refers to freezing council tax; the shadow Minister also mentioned freezing council tax under Labour. However, Labour-run Gedling Borough Council is increasing council tax by 2.98% this year, in spite of the fully costed Conservative amendment that would have enabled a council tax freeze. Does my right hon. Friend agree that whereas Labour's rhetoric is about freezing taxes, the reality is tax, tax and tax again?

John Glen: Absolutely, and I think the good people of Gedling will come to the right conclusions next week.

What is really clear is that this Conservative Government will get on with the business of resetting the conditions for growth after this enormously difficult period. We are setting the conditions for protecting the vulnerable and delivering for the British people. As a united Government, we remain focused on what really matters for the British people. I urge the House to reject the Labour motion.

5.12 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I was intrigued by the Chief Secretary's answer to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) about forecasts: I think he said something along the lines of "For every fiscal event there's a forecast, and on many occasions it turns out to be wrong." That may be correct. Is it not passing strange, then, that the Government's own fiscal charter, which they announced only six months ago, is based on precisely such a forward-looking view, with forecasts on a five-year rolling basis? I think the Government and the Chief Secretary might want to sort their lines out on that one.

I agree with what the Chief Secretary said towards the end of his speech about boosting productivity, which is a perennial problem. He is absolutely right about that, of course, but he will recall from the OBR forecast and the Red Book that productivity growth does not exceed 1.5% in any year of the forecast period. Whatever plan the Government thought they had, they will need to do a little better.

The Chief Secretary quite rightly mentioned the requirement to get more people into the workforce; I think he mentioned having an extra 110,000 people by the end of the forecast period. That is welcome, but it would be a fraction of 1% of the workforce of 33 million. Again, I think it is a case of "Five out of 10—must do better."

There is much to agree with in the Opposition motion: the condemnation of the Tory Government and their mismanagement of the economy; the regret that the UK is the only G7 country whose economy has not returned to pre-pandemic levels; and the ambition, which I am sure is shared across the House, to secure sustained growth and good jobs. However, I will focus not on macroeconomics, but on the impact on real people of inflation and the cost of living crisis that many of them face, not least because energy price hikes, inflation, and mortgage and rent increases are continuing to erode people's standard of living. We certainly know from the November OBR forecast that inflation was set to peak at a 40-year high, and that wages and living standards were set to be squeezed by 7%, wiping out all the growth of the past eight years. By March, the OBR was telling us that real disposable income would fall by nearly 6%. We now know that telecoms prices will rise as well: BT confirmed that its costs would rise by 15% on 31 March, O2 is increasing prices for SIM-only customers by 17%, and TalkTalk will increase its prices for landline and broadband customers by 14%.

Grocery prices also continue to climb. In February the increase reached a new record high of 17.1%, and more recently the prices of some goods have risen by 19.1%, which represents the best part of £1,000 per year per household for the average weekly shop. The prices of essential food items have also risen in recent months. The price of two pints of semi-skimmed milk is up from 92p to £1.37, a 49% increase; a litre of olive oil now costs £7.28, which is a 65% increase over the past year, and the price of vegetables has risen by 31% over the same period. However, inflation does not hit all households equally. It has a particularly dire impact on lower-income households, which spend a much higher proportion of their incomes on necessities such as food and energy. For some people, it is even worse than that: those with allergies or special dietary requirements are hit even harder. According to analysis carried out by the Allergy Team, people with specific dietary requirements are now paying up to 73% more for food than those who do not need to buy "free from" products at their local stores.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has warned that low-income families simply do not have the resources to go on bearing the cost of soaring inflation. It noted that "nine in ten families on Universal Credit said they couldn't afford the essentials in October last year. Since then, inflation has been in double digits".

Even the Office for National Statistics told us in April that about half the adult population—49%—were worried about the cost of energy or the cost of food. I think that

[Stewart Hosie]

some of the comments we have heard from Tory Members today spoke volumes. It is almost as if they thought that Tory voters would not be affected by these prices, when half the adult population are worried about the cost of energy or food. I think that they should take notice.

We also know that families are beginning to feel the pain of increased mortgage costs, which, while they may have fallen back a little from the high point last October, are still much higher than they were a year ago; and of course, the central bank has increased the base rate for the 11th consecutive time. Let me put that in context. Nationwide has reported that its standard mortgage rate will rise to nearly 8%—7.74%—on 1 May.

It is rather obvious that, when it comes to the cost of living, the Government should have three urgent tasks. The first is continuing to help families with high energy costs, not by simply freezing the cap—although it is not really a cap at all—but by reducing it from £2,500 to £2,000, as well as maintaining the energy bills support scheme. The second is to bear down on inflation; forcing down energy prices would help with that, as it did last year. Thirdly, as this was mentioned earlier, when it comes to the elements that are under the Government's control—the next round of public sector pay awards, benefits, the minimum wage and pension settlements—they should ensure that no one falls further behind, and should introduce fairness into the system to pay for it. As the motion says, it could be paid for by a meaningful windfall tax, the ending of non-dom status, the taxing of share buy-backs, and the scrapping of costly vanity nuclear projects.

That is not to say that there is no support from the UK Government—the Chief Secretary referred to some of it, which he rightly described as targeted—but it would be helpful for them to look at the efforts made in Scotland and the range of additional measures that have been put in place there. The Scottish child payment has been further expanded to all eligible six to 15-year-olds. It has increased to £25 a week, and 387,000 children are now forecast to be eligible this year. The various family payments, including the Scottish child payment, could be worth around £10,000 by the time an eligible child turns six, compared with around £1,800 for comparable families in England and Wales. There are more free school lunches during term time for all pupils in primaries 1 to 5, which is the most generous free school meals offer in the UK, saving families on average £400 a year per child.

We have doubled the fuel insecurity fund to support people at risk of self-disconnection or self-rationing of energy. The new winter heating payment that replaces the Department for Work and Pensions system will provide a stable, reliable annual payment, helping 400,000 people. We are maintaining investment in the Scottish welfare fund at £41 million this year, and continuing to invest in discretionary housing payments, with £84 million this year. We are also continuing to provide funding to deliver the council tax reduction scheme. So it is obvious that this Government can, and now should, do more.

Of course, the inflationary pressures that have driven the cost of living crisis are not there by chance. They are not all a consequence of external shocks, and they are

not all a result of covid or of Ukraine. The inflationary elephant in the room is Brexit. The London School of Economics has said that

“by the end of 2021, Brexit had already cost UK households a total of £5.8 billion in higher food bills”.

Last year, as prices were rising steeply, the former Bank of England policymaker Adam Posen insisted that 80% of the reason why the UK has the highest inflation of any G7 country was the impact of Brexit on immigration and the labour market. Even the Harvard Economics Review has stated that Brexit

“can be seen as the guilty culprit in Britain's inflationary crisis.”

I agree with this criticism of the Government. I agree that we should seek higher sustainable growth, but until the inflationary impact of Brexit is even recognised, it will be impossible to fully address the cost of living crisis that so many of our constituents are facing.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We will, I am afraid, have to start with a four-minute time limit. We will see where we go from there.

5.22 pm

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I want to speak very briefly to commend the Government for their efforts, not just over the last couple of years, and not just since the appalling aggression of Putin in Ukraine and the post-pandemic crisis, but all the way back to 2010, when a Conservative coalition Government inherited the biggest mess out. When I was doing a bit of research for this afternoon's debate, I looked back through the years since 1973. Just look at unemployment. Every single Labour Government have left office with unemployment higher than when they came in. When I looked back, I could see that unemployment continued to fall very briefly following the excellent legacy left by a Conservative Government, but then, inexorably, it crept up again. And under Labour, there was no money left when the Conservatives took office in 2010. That is the start of the story. When we look at what really matters to people and at how young people want a role model and want to learn, get out there and get a good job for themselves, we see that unemployment matters so much. In the United Kingdom now, we have the lowest unemployment figures since the early 1970s—in fact, since 1975.

When we look at growth, yes, at the moment we are challenged, as are all economies around the world, but actually, looking at the facts, the UK was growing faster than any economy in the G7 over the last three years, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) said. Last year, only the UK had growth of 4%; Germany's was 1.8%. It is easy for the Opposition to talk about the cost of living crisis and what the Conservative Government have done wrong, but they are not looking at the big picture. They should look at our trade policy. The UK has left the EU, and what are we able to do? We can turn to what is predicted to be the fastest-growing area of the world: Asia. We can expand our global trade and be an advocate for global free trade. There is an opportunity for all nations to rise on the back of more global trade. For so many years, the Opposition tried to scupper the will of the people, as expressed in the Brexit referendum, by preventing us from leaving the EU. Instead, we are now free to form our own trade policy and to trade with the rest of the world, which is fantastic.

The hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), for whom I have a lot of time, talked about pensions and the difficulties for people in the UK. I wanted to intervene to ask her about the Leader of the Opposition. Bearing in mind that he had legislation to protect his own pension—with no lifetime allowance, can protect his family as much as he likes—will he resile from that? Will he scrap that little statutory instrument, so that he can be in the same boat as the rest of us? Or is it one rule for him and a different rule for the rest of the country? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Mr Elmore, you have a fantastic baritone voice. Save it for singing.

5.26 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): This cost of living crisis is “unlike anything we’ve seen”. Those are the words of Citizens Advice, which is truly on the frontline when it comes to the real bread-and-butter problems people face.

We know that the rising cost of essentials impacts those on the lowest incomes the most. I used to talk about bumps in the road—unexpected life events that derail people, such as job loss or bereavement—but increasing numbers of people are simply running out of road. There is more debt and more unmanageable debt, and more demand for advice services. StepChange and Citizens Advice both say that the size and scale of the debt crisis is unlike anything they have seen before.

The debt crisis means more borrowing, too. StepChange has found that people who use credit cards and overdrafts to pay for essentials, as more and more people do, are 10 times more likely to be in problem debt than those who do not. Some 1.4 million people are relying on high-cost credit to cover rent and other household bills.

There is also a relatively new phenomenon: the negative budget. This is when, even after debt advice sessions and budget counselling, a client’s income is not enough to meet their essential outgoings. Half of Citizens Advice clients and a third of StepChange clients are in that predicament. That is particularly worrying because it requires a rethink of how to support the most financially vulnerable. Yes, there are practical measures, but we need to better fund our advice agencies, which are seeing an enormous increase in demand. We have to be careful that this includes provision for face-to-face advice in addition to virtual advice, because people sometimes need to see a trusted adviser before going to another channel.

We need to overhaul the type of debt solutions that advice agencies can offer. I welcome the breathing space that gives debtors respite from their creditors while they get their finances on track. I also welcome the expanded access to debt relief orders and the fresh start that bankruptcy can bring, but the up-front application fees are pricing people out of these options with nowhere to go. Applying for a debt relief order costs £90 and declaring bankruptcy costs £680, and those are up-front fees. They are simply not affordable for people who need such options, particularly those with negative budgets, and we need to consider how to fund them.

We should also be wary of individual voluntary arrangements. Too many people are forced into IVAs without the impartial advice they need to ensure they are the best option for them. In fact, it is probably time

to undertake a full, holistic review of debt solutions. We need a simple, straightforward system that ensures people in debt are always able to access the system that best suits their needs, through independent, impartial advice that is suited to the individual. Such a review must look at enforcement, as the use of bailiffs is far too widespread. I was pleased to sponsor the launch of the Enforcement Conduct Board, but it needs to be put on a statutory footing. It is vital that creditors have to use a bailiff that is accredited by the ECB, and that includes central and local government, who are some of the worst offenders.

There is no easy solution to the cost of living crisis, but for those who have reached the end of the road and can see no way out of their debt, we need to move from temporary fixes and piecemeal solutions to a long-term, sustainable plan.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Angela Richardson.

5.30 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak so early in this debate, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The fact is that unprecedented international conditions have led to instability in our economy. Given the global world in which we live, any international crisis can and will have an impact at a national level sooner or later. I am proud that the UK has long been at the forefront of work to forge an international system characterised by stability and co-operation. This Government have always taken very seriously their responsibilities as a member of the G7, the G20 and the Commonwealth of Nations. This Government proudly took on the leadership of COP26 and rallied the world’s Heads of State and Government to take action on climate change.

Despite all those commendable efforts, there are some things that this or any other Government cannot predict or control. The Government cannot predict when a potentially deadly virus will cause a pandemic; they cannot control when a dangerous autocrat marches his troops into a neighbouring country; and they most definitely cannot control the weather. However, when listening to the Labour Front Bencher’s speech, one got the sense that had Labour been in power there would, magically, have been no pandemic, war or adverse weather. The public are listening and they are not stupid. They have experienced those things with us and they will not be taken in by what the Opposition say.

From the covid pandemic to Putin’s senseless war in Ukraine, and bad weather conditions in north Africa and Spain, this Government have been tested time and again. Our constituents across the country are feeling the squeeze caused by those events, but this Government have been there to help them deal with the burden of high energy bills, soaring inflation and uneven food availability. Actions always speak louder than words, and the actions of this Government are clear: we have provided £94 billion in cost of living support, helping the most vulnerable in our society; the energy price guarantee has been extended for three months; and three cost of living payments totalling £900 are going directly into the bank accounts of those on means-tested benefits, starting today.

[Angela Richardson]

But what about the words? The words of Labour's motion are nothing but a smokescreen for its past and present lack of grip on the economy. The party that casually left a note saying that there was "no money left" now criticises the Conservative Government who have grown our economy at a faster rate than those of France, Japan and Italy since 2010, and at the same rate as Germany since the Brexit referendum. The party under which youth unemployment rose by nearly 45% criticises the party under which the total unemployment rate has fallen to a near 50-year low. When it comes to the economy, it is only the Conservative party that the British people can trust. The Labour party has never left government with unemployment lower than when it took office or with the economy on a better footing.

Even in opposition, Labour advocates for the same disastrous recipe of unfunded spending commitments and yet more borrowing. So far, the bill that Labour would saddle taxpayers with stands at £90 million in spending commitments that are plucked out of thin air—that is roughly £3,000 per household. All that comes with a good serving of borrowing, to the tune of £28 billion each year until 2030.

Going back to the motion before the House, I advise the Labour party to get on with understanding the people's priorities and how the economy actually works. Labour should stop using the non-dom tax status as a cheap political attack under the guise of economic policy and stop going on about a windfall tax, which this Government introduced last May and increased as part of the autumn statement last November.

5.34 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): Listening to the Minister, I get the distinct impression that Labour's Front Benchers and Labour colleagues more generally are simply making things up; it is as though the cost of living crisis does not exist. But I know that the cost of living crisis is getting worse as the days go by and that it is becoming increasingly difficult for people to afford even the most basic consumables. I am sure that the Minister can afford to pay attention to this, even if he cannot afford much else under his Government's mess. I did expect a bit more originality from him in explaining away the crisis. It is now getting pretty tedious listening to the same old claptrap about global headwinds, international disruption, the impact of the war in Ukraine, supply line challenges due to this or that, or the covid landscape.

There was no mention of the Government's part in the debacle. The Government—not a Cameron Government, not a May Government, not a Johnson Government, not a Truss Government, not even a Sunak Government, but a Tory Government—have been in office for 13 years. I know that it feels much longer than 13 years, but does the Minister grasp that at all? He seems to think that the previous four Administrations have nothing to do with the current Administration. Well, I have a bit of unwelcome news for him: they do.

The Minister may be surprised to learn that we have had seven Chancellors of the Exchequer since 2010, which is, on average, about one every two years. If we put the six-year chancellorship of George Osborne aside, we have had, on average, a new Tory Chancellor

every 12 months. The Minister may be even more surprised to find out that they have all been Tory Chancellors—yes, all seven of them. In fact, I will let him into a little secret: the current Prime Minister used to be one of them.

Does the Minister not think that such lack of continuity, on top of the general incompetence, may have had a bearing on the current parlous state of the economy? Does he not think that such an environment of chaos has had a bearing on the cost of living crisis? Does he seriously expect us to believe that the Government's actions have made things better? Does he seriously expect us to swallow the narrative that all this financial, fiscal and economic entropy was foisted on an otherwise competent coterie of Tory Chancellors who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time over a period of 13 years?

Between them, that list of failed Chancellors broke their own fiscal rules at least 11 times, if I recall rightly. Has that not had anything to do with the current cost of living crisis? Have cutting housing benefit, bringing in the bedroom tax, freezing child benefit and making changes to tax credit not had a bearing on the cost of living crisis? What about the 10-year virtual freeze in public sector pay? How about the cuts to schools or the justice system? It goes on and on, but the Government will take no responsibility whatsoever for it.

What about the issue of debt? The Minister should be unsurprised to learn that Tory Governments have been responsible for the bulk of all Government debt—a debt currently standing at £2.5 trillion. They claim to be the party of sound finance, but they are not. They have managed to pay back 0.5% of all the money they have borrowed. They say they are the party of economic confidence. That is a joke.

5.38 pm

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): Nobody should be terribly surprised that we face difficult economic times if a Government lock an economy down for nearly two years; if they pay 7 million, 8 million or 9 million people to sit at home; if they provide grants to keep companies in business; and if they intervene on an unprecedented level. Indeed, the intervention to get us through the worst pandemic since 1918 was almost on the scale of a world war. The Government are to be commended for doing what they did to save lives.

Following that, we have had a major economic crisis and war in Ukraine. That has caused an almost unprecedented spike in energy prices. The last time they rose as much was in 1974. Both those factors have had a big effect on Governments, businesses and individuals. The Government have done an awful lot to try to safeguard people's living standards. They have provided a cap on energy prices, they have provided a £400 grant, they have put the pension up by 10.1%, they have put benefits up and they are providing special payments. Billions have been spent on supporting people, and that is quite right in an extraordinary time.

Of course we can always have a political argument about whether we should do more or do less, but the most important point is to have an economic policy that gets us through the immediate crisis and into better times when the sun will shine. The good news is that in the course of this year, inflation is expected to fall

substantially. We already see a fall in input price inflation figures, and a fall will come through in food prices and energy prices in the course of the year.

There is a debate about whether we will have 2% or 3% inflation, but given that it looks from the negotiations as though pay will go up a little bit, it is clear that inflation will fall below the level of pay increases sometime this summer. We will then have a situation where living standards start to recover. I do not pretend that people will immediately turn round and say, "This is great!", because it takes several months for people to feel that that has happened, but we are heading towards a situation where the big reductions in living standards that have taken place over the last 12 months, and which have understandably made my party unpopular and made the public mood very scratchy, will start to reverse.

Through sound financial policies, the Government have done their best to keep a stable economy and set us on a path for growth. Looking at the public sector finance figures today, I hope that, when it is prudently responsible to do so, we will increase incentives by reducing tax. That in itself will help some of those who are struggling.

I think the Government are on the right track. I have no doubt that this is a difficult time for many of our constituents, but I do not think anybody can complain that we have not done what we can. I look forward, over the next three, six and 12 months, to a better economic situation. Ultimately, the argument that we are having on the Floor of the House is this: if people feel miserable and badly off, they will vote us out of office, and if they feel that things are going better, they may well vote us back in. I am optimistic.

5.41 pm

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I wish we did not need this debate, but unfortunately, as all Opposition Members know, the cost of living crisis is biting harder than ever. As we have heard, under the Conservatives, food prices have risen at the highest rate for more than 45 years. I want to speak today about the implications of that for disabled people and those with long-term health conditions.

Depending on the nature of their disability, some people have difficulty preparing certain foods and rely on pre-prepared or convenience foods, which frequently works out more expensive than buying raw ingredients. The price of ready meals rose by almost 22% in 2022. If, for example, someone has difficulty standing or sitting for long enough to prepare a meal from scratch, they may feel that they have no choice but to pay those prices.

Rising food costs are also a huge source of concern for those on specialist medical diets. In a report published last month, Coeliac UK revealed that a gluten-free weekly shop can be up to 20% more expensive than a standard shop. For example, the cheapest loaves of gluten-free bread cost more than seven times the standard equivalent.

Even before the pandemic and the current cost of living crisis, disabled people faced extra costs of £583 per month on average—the so-called disability price tag. Scope is set to reveal an updated figure tomorrow, which I understand is substantially higher. I can confirm that the new statistics show that the extra cost of disability is equivalent to 63% of household income after housing costs. If, for example, a non-disabled

household spends £100 per week on their food shop, an equivalent disabled household will need an additional £63. Again, even before the cost of living crisis, people with coeliac disease and those with other specialist diets faced higher prices when accessing essential foods.

When the price of everything has risen so substantially and there are fewer opportunities to shop around, it follows that those who are already at the sharp end will be hit hardest. I am sure that the Minister will agree that that is a shocking disparity. I hope to hear in his concluding remarks that he will pay close attention to Scope's announcement tomorrow on the disability price tag, and lay out a clear plan to alleviate the financial pressure on the people hit hardest, first by covid and now by the cost of living crisis.

5.45 pm

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): I take this issue very seriously. Clearly, families across the country are feeling the pinch at the moment. We in this House are all keen to address the issue in a constructive and sympathetic manner.

I am delighted that 9,100 families in Clwyd South will receive £301 from the Government as the latest cost of living payments begin to be sent out today. That cost of living payment is being made to more than 8 million families on means-tested benefits across the UK. It is the first of three cost of living payments that will, together, total £900. Some families will receive £1,350 of support. Those payments will be accompanied by a £150 payment for people on disability benefits, and a £300 payment for pensioners at the end of 2023, on top of winter fuel payments.

That is part of a much larger programme by the Government to support vulnerable people in these difficult times. Indeed, the cost of living package to help the most vulnerable has been worth £94 billion. A key part of this is addressing inflation. As the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said, we expect inflation to halve by the end of this year, so the issues that we have at the moment and to which the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) referred will mitigate themselves, and we will see inflation come down later in the year.

I am proud to represent a Government who, in these difficult times, have gone out of their way to support people, as my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syme) said in his excellent speech. I will not go back over the pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine, but as he said, those issues put exceptional pressure on the UK economy, and Labour Members need to take that on board and at least acknowledge it in their remarks, which, so far, they seem not to have done.

We have to be realistic about what we can do to help people in a time of crisis. I am pleased that we are extending the energy price guarantee, at £2,500, for three months from April to July, which will help families to save an average of £160 on their energy bills. The extension means that, thanks to Government support, families will have saved £1,500 on their energy bills since October 2022. I strongly support a number of other measures: the uprating of benefits and the state pension in line with inflation protects the most vulnerable households; freezing fuel duty for a 13th consecutive year saves the average driver about £200; extending our household support fund to more than £2 billion ensures that local authorities can support the most vulnerable

[Simon Baynes]

in their communities; raising the national living wage by 9.7% increases wages by an average of £1,600 for 2 million low-paid workers. Those measures will support the most vulnerable in our society.

I intervened earlier on the Labour Government's record on unemployment between 1997 and 2010. During that period, the number of unemployed people increased from 2.1 million to 2.5 million, and there was a 45% increase in youth unemployment. As we have seen in a number of comments—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I call Alex Davies-Jones.

5.49 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): The central issue that we are debating is very simple; there is a very simple question to address: after 13 years of Conservative rule in Westminster, do our constituents feel better off than before? [Interruption.] Exactly. I know from talking to residents and people across my constituency of Pontypridd and Taff Ely, and from being on the doorstep across the UK in the past few weeks, that the answer is a clear and resounding no. Across the country, every single family has felt the impact of what the Trussell Trust and many others have described as a cost of living emergency. When we look across all the indicators, it is no wonder, with inflation reaching a four-year high, an average family's weekly food shop up over £700 this year, and the essentials of housing, fuel and power up almost £1,500 on average. All the while, real wages have stagnated and Britain has slipped behind other developed nations—all of this on the Conservative Government's watch.

The Government have completely failed to get a grip on the crisis, while the human cost continues to be utterly devastating. Nowhere is that more apparent to me than in my own patch in the south Wales valleys, where, according to data from the Office for National Statistics, residents in my local authority of Rhondda Cynon Taff report life-quality indicators lower than the UK average, including on life expectancy, happiness, the local employment rate and disposable household income. All of that is thanks to more than a decade of inaction by this incompetent Tory Government.

Let us be clear: as the cost of living crisis continues to rage, regional inequality is deepening by the day. So much for levelling up—we are not even levelling equal. Our incredible local authority, together with the Welsh Labour Government, as I have said, are moving heaven and earth to do what they can to help people in these exceptional circumstances, including with RCT's regular food support grants to our local food banks. Those grants, together with the amazing food bank volunteers, are a lifeline to thousands of my constituents, who need support now more than ever. Sadly, the RCT area saw a 14% rise in food bank usage in the last year. Despite local efforts, the UK Tory Government continue to sit on their hands by not granting devolved nations the proper support they need and people in Wales are being let down.

I am immensely proud that our local food bank collected an incredible 16,000 kilos of food donations from generous shoppers at local supermarkets in the last year, but it is an indictment of the UK Government's

failures that my constituents have had to step in where the Government have failed. While the UK Tory Government desperately attempt to shift media coverage from the realities—they gloss over the fact that they crashed the economy last September—we all know the truth. The cost of living crisis is far from over. Later this week, I will host a dedicated cost of living event for my constituents in a local community centre in Rhydyfelin because these issues are ongoing. They are all too real and felt all too keenly. Again, it is a heavy indictment of the UK Government that my team and I have received so many messages from terrified constituents unable to feed themselves or pay their bills. That is why it is absolutely right that colleagues have focused on the impact of the cost of living crisis on individual consumers, households and families.

Another heartbreaking consequence of this crisis is that, with people spending less, inevitably businesses are suffering, too. In my constituency, we are fortunate to have some incredible independent businesses and our high street is thriving. I am shocked, however, by the responses from businesses on this issue. They cannot cope with the rising cost of energy bills or business rates. They are struggling to support themselves and, when our businesses struggle, our local economy struggles, too.

I could go on, but sadly we are limited for time. We must move beyond a sticking plaster for our economy and embrace real, ambitious change to ease the cost of living crisis and unlock economic growth. After 13 years of failed Tory rule, it is clear that only a Labour Government in Westminster are capable of that change.

5.53 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Yet again, in the face of the serious challenges that we and many other nations face, Labour chooses to play politics. The pressure on households is real, but does the Labour party really believe that economic issues are defined by national borders? For example, UK food inflation in March was 19.1%. The EU average at the time was slightly higher, at 19.2%. Several EU countries face much higher inflation, including food price inflation of up to 44.8%. The International Monetary Fund shows that the UK inflation rate is the same as Sweden's, and only slightly higher than Germany's.

Do the Opposition really believe that this is solely a national issue? They seem to forget that we have had a pandemic, war in Europe and a resulting energy crisis. Our Conservative Government did not cause any of those, but they did respond, not by playing politics or by pointing fingers, but by delivering for people and protecting households. When people needed help, we provided covid support to households and businesses, the largest increase in benefits and the state pension for 32 years, direct support with energy bills for every household, and direct cash payments of at least £900 to the most vulnerable households. We lowered the universal credit taper rate, increased the minimum wage and froze fuel duty, and we are now investing in more affordable childcare so that parents can return to work knowing that their children are getting a great start in life, too. But unlike Labour, we do not simply spend with no plan for tomorrow: we work to rebalance our economy after each shock. That is why we have a plan to halve inflation, grow the economy and reduce debt. We are supporting

research and development and promoting the UK as the future for life science and STEM industries. We are leading on green energy and carbon capture, and delivering new jobs and investment through freeports and investment zones.

Not only are we helping nationally, but well-run local authorities such as Runnymede Borough Council are delivering excellent services and administering direct financial support while maintaining low council tax. I am pleased by the timing of this debate, as it highlights what is at stake in the upcoming elections. If people want good governance and support locally, tackling the challenge of inflation, they need to vote Conservative on 4 May. The Conservatives have a clear economic plan; Labour only has a soundbite.

5.55 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I wonder whether Government Members need to work on their lines a bit because they seem to be saying, “There was nothing we could do—there has been a war in Ukraine and covid.” That leads us to ask, what is the point of them really if there is nothing they can do when there is a pandemic and when our country is in need?

The defining question for people to hold in their minds as they vote in the election is this: “Do I really want another five years of this?” In everything, in every way, the 13 failed years of Conservative Government and Lib Dem coalition rule—the Lib Dems do seem to forget that they were part of it for five years—have failed our country and prevented us from reaching our potential. If growth had continued at the same rate as it did under a Labour Government, we would have an extra £40 billion for our public services.

But what makes me really angry about this Government is the way in which they have made too many people feel like this is as good as it gets, that we do not deserve to have good public services, or that good public services are beyond our reach. In the next elections, they are relying on people giving up hope—hope that our country can be so much better than it is today.

When Labour left office, public satisfaction in the NHS was the highest it had ever been. We were so proud of our achievements in the NHS that, in the 2012 Olympics, we put it on show for the whole world to see. That was how much we celebrated it, but not only have this Government broken our NHS—they are revelling in breaking the people who are working for it. They are telling working people in this country that their ambition to not just survive, but actually live a life, is beyond their reach, however small they may think it is. They tell them instead, “No, strive instead for 30p meals. That is as good as you are going to get under this Government—30p for your meal and that is it.”

If people want more than that, that is when all the cheerleaders will have a go. If they want to work with their trade unions to fight for a better salary so they can afford a bit more to eat, that is unreasonable; it is so unreasonable that this Government introduced legislation to stop workers being able to come together to fight for the salaries that they actually need. When we look at our international comparators, we see that the French are 10% richer and the Germans are 19% richer, and that is a result of this Government. They are continuing to fail us. Our country is seeing what happens when

low-paid workers are told by this Government, “Go and get another job.” Well, they are going to go and get another job in adult social care, and look at what has happened there.

The last Labour Government achieved so much: the longest period of sustained low inflation since the 1960s, low mortgage rates, the national minimum wage, 14,000 more police in England and Wales, a cut in crime of 32%, child benefit up by 26%, 36,000 more teachers and 274,000 more support staff. That is what the last Labour Government achieved. This Conservative Government can judge the Labour party on our record, and on 4 May, the public will judge the Conservatives on theirs. [HON. MEMBERS: “More!”] I will save it for next time.

5.59 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) is right to feel empathy and sympathy and to feel angry for the people challenged by the cost of living, as everyone in this House does, whatever side they are on. Families are struggling right across the country and that is because of inflation, which steals money from everyone’s pockets. The best cure for all the issues we have all been discussing on either side of the House is to deal with inflation, yet in its 12-line motion on the cost of living, Labour has not made any mention at all of the Government’s intervention to reduce the level of household inflation. It is as though the Opposition are not aware of the £94 billion package that the Government have instituted over the last period. That is an average of £3,300 of Government support per household, which is having a direct impact on reducing the headline level of inflation. It includes halving people’s energy bills over this winter at an average of £1,500 of support per household. That has been extended to the summer, when prices are forecast to come down.

There is an enormous irony that we are having this Opposition day debate on the cost of living, on a motion with no mention of Government support, on the very day when £301 has landed in the bank accounts of the 8 million most-vulnerable families in the country through the household support fund. However, the motion does have some positive suggestions to make. It suggests we should freeze council tax. The best way for people to ensure that their council tax is frozen is to vote Conservative on 4 May. People should come and look at my council in Norfolk, Broadland District Council, which has frozen council tax not for one year, but for the past two years. If Labour councils were serious about helping people with the cost of living, they would run their councils just as efficiently as we do, and they would keep their council tax down and freeze it.

The other thing that the Opposition have done today is to have the first Opposition day debate on water infrastructure, yet in that debate, the effect of what they were arguing for with their so-called plan would have had the effect of increasing water bills by a full £1,000 a household. Is that joined-up opposition? I do not think so. What we have is the Conservatives giving £3,300 of support per household and freezing council taxes more often than not in Conservative-run districts such as my own, against Labour which, through its policy requirements, is saying we should increase bills by £1,000 and have higher council taxes in areas they represent. The best solution to the cost of living crisis is to halve inflation,

[Jerome Mayhew]

grow the economy and reduce debt while supporting the most vulnerable in our society. Those are the priorities of my constituents and constituents right around the country, and they are the priorities of this Government.

6.3 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): I would like to raise the terrifying consequences of the declining living standards experienced by my constituents in West Derby and by people across the city of Liverpool. One third of the people in my city are now in some kind of food poverty. Two thirds of my constituents are having to cut back on hot water, heating or electricity. The crisis was not inevitable; it has been fuelled by political choices—the political choice of Tory Governments to privatise our utilities and infrastructure; the political choice to allow profiteering in supermarkets and the oil and gas companies; the political choice of this Government to inflict 13 years of brutal austerity on my constituents; and the political choices to cut our vital public services to the bone, to decimate the social safety net and state pension, to strip away workers' rights and to create a crisis of insecure contracts and low pay. The Government's political choices have destroyed the services that can be the difference between life and death for many of my constituents in these times of crisis.

The rise of 19.2% in the price of food in the past year is the highest since 1977, and it is alongside the sharpest fall in real wages since 1977. The Resolution Foundation calculated that had wages continued to grow as they were before the financial crash of 2008, the average worker would make £11,000 more a year than they do now, taking rising prices into account—imagine where we would be. Recently, the Food Foundation reported that child food poverty has doubled in a year: 3.7 million children—one in five—have eaten less, skipped meals or gone without meals for an entire day. We are in danger of losing a generation of children through no fault of their own. Those who will shape the future of our nation will not reach their full potential because of the preventable scourge of hunger.

It is a disgraceful injustice that many of my constituents and so many children across this country are in this situation, yet at the same time inflation has been fuelled by “greedflation”, with supermarkets, food manufacturers and shipping companies protecting shareholder dividends by giving extra lifts to prices. Unite the union has highlighted:

“Despite the rise in wholesale prices, Tesco, Sainsbury's and Asda still managed to increase their profits by an astonishing 97% in 2021.”

At a recent sitting of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, we heard evidence from the UN special rapporteur on the right to food, who told us:

“Corporations have a significant amount of power in markets”, but

“Governments have tools in place to stabilise prices.”

In West Derby, there are nurses, educators, firefighters, postal workers, rail staff and civil servants all using food banks. This is one of the most grave and frightening crises we have seen in our lifetimes. The situation simply cannot go on, so I ask the Minister to intervene now to support my constituents and services in West Derby, and curb the selfish profiteering by some companies in the food supply chain and energy industry.

I also call on the Minister to make food a legal right for all, to enshrine the right to food in legislation, and to end the scandal of hunger and food banks once and for all, beginning by providing universal free school meals for every primary and secondary pupil in state education. Let us heed this evidence, and invest in our communities and our children. We do not need sticking plasters and tinkering around the edges. We need the kitchen sink throwing at this dire situation for millions to transform the future of our nation. We should demand nothing less and settle for nothing less.

6.6 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): The cost of living is the No. 1 issue that comes up on doorsteps. That is why it is so important the Government are working on their plan to reduce inflation by at least half, and it looks as though it is going to come down by a lot more than that. Today is a good day to have this debate, because it is the day that 8 million people—actually, more than 8 million people—will get the first instalment of the £900 cost of living payment, including nearly 9,000 people in my constituency.

There is a lot in this motion, from economic growth to wages, taxes and energy. I will try to skip through as many of those as I can, beginning with economic growth. In every year since 2010 until we hit the pandemic, the economy grew. It grew by 19.2% during that period, with the third highest growth in the G7. We saw during that period, until the pandemic, fantastic employment figures as well. When Labour left office in 2010, unemployment was 8%, and it is now less than 4%. We saw the equivalent of 1,000 people being added to the workforce every single day in that period up to 2019. On youth unemployment, which is of particular interest to me, Labour left office with it at over 20% and it is now also at a historical low.

On wages, the national living wage since 2016 has seen an average of £5,000 go into people's annual wages. The Labour party does not want to talk about pensions in this motion, which is okay, but I will just note that this Government's triple lock policy has added £2,300 to the value of the state pension, and we must not forget the important role that plays for pensioners with the cost of living.

On taxes, I welcome Labour to the cause of being concerned about taxes being too high. It is not their record in government, but better late than never. We have doubled the personal allowance to more than £12,500 on which people pay no tax whatsoever. This motion says that Labour wants to freeze council tax. I doubt its local authorities would be supportive of that. However, leaving that to one side, there is this awkward fact that in the 13 years of this Government so far council tax has gone up by 36%, but in the 13 years of the Labour Government it went up by 110%. It is easy to be in favour of council tax and everything else being lower when a party is not in power, but it is slightly harder when it has to make such decisions.

Turning to energy prices, through the combination of the rebate and the energy price guarantee, families have been saved £1,500 on their energy bills since October. This is a huge investment by a Government to help keep down the cost of living, paid for by a windfall tax that the Labour party says it wants to extend. It is already

going until 2028, so we have taken the action that Labour is just talking about all the time, pretending that we have not done so already.

The Prime Minister wants the country to take maths more seriously, and I think he is right. Maths is important for people in the labour market. I have never asked him, but I have a feeling that maths is always in his mind, because when he sits on the Front Bench, he looks across at a sea of Labour MPs who do not take maths seriously at all. Every week we are told that if we end non-dom status, put VAT on private school fees and use the windfall tax, we can pay for whatever our hearts desire—childcare, council tax, freezing energy bills, free breakfast clubs, whatever we like. That is totally unserious. There is no greater example of the anti-maths mindset than the Labour party, and as usual its sums do not add up.

6.10 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): In terms of maths, no matter how far a number of my constituents try to make the pennies stretch, they are just not stretching enough. Families' incomes continue to go down and costs continue to go up. That is the reality of the Tory Government. The cost of living crisis has been going on for some time, and it is important that we do not talk about it as something normal and something we should accept. Every day I see that with my constituents, who are so desperate with nowhere to go. We see it in our casework and our advice surgeries. Household incomes are being squeezed. To put that in context, food prices are going up 50% faster than elsewhere in the G7, putting Britain's food inflation rate at a staggering 19.2%. That is not some abstract maths figure from economists; that is felt in people's weekly shop. When people go to the supermarket, they find that the price of sugar is up by 42%, milk is up by a third, and pasta by a quarter. Those are basic food items that families need to survive. That is the maths they are struggling with when they struggle to pay for this cost of living crisis.

I want to highlight the impact of this crisis on young people, which far too often we forget. We talk about young people being the future, but a number of them are struggling to live day to day. They are struggling with zero-hours contracts. We see the claims about youth unemployment going down, but these young people are in insecure jobs—Deliveroo jobs. That is not aspiration. That is not what I want for young people in Vauxhall. I want them to have long-term careers, not insecure jobs, yet that is the reality behind the figures that Conservative Members keep citing.

I am proud to represent Vauxhall. On my visits to schools and youth centres I see bold and passionate-thinking young people, but a number of them feel that politics is not for them, does not speak to them, and that the economy is skewed against them. The sad reality is that they are right. Instead of the Government getting behind votes at 16, votes are being suppressed next month with the introduction of voter ID. Why are the Government so scared of allowing young people to vote? Why?

Figures from Barnardo's show that one in four young people now live in poverty, and sadly many more face going hungry. Yesterday, children from Stockwell Primary School visited Parliament, and they spoke to me about their worries and concerns. I recently co-chaired an event of the all-party group for London, with the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill).

We hosted an event with a youth charity, London Youth, to hear directly from young people about what the cost of living crisis is doing to them. We heard how many of them are having to take on weekend jobs alongside their schoolwork, just to support their families who are struggling. We heard stories of young people stepping up to care for their younger siblings, because their parents are having to work more hours because childcare is extortionate. We heard about those young people's abject lack of hope of being able to move and have secure roots because—guess what?—they cannot afford to buy.

I have spoken about the need for us to end section 20 notices, and the impact that the cost of living crisis is having on insecure housing. If we want our young people to have hope, be successful, and contribute to the economy, we need to support them by not abandoning them, and by not making them suffer through the cost of living crisis. We need to give those young people hope, and that will happen only with a Labour Government.

6.14 pm

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): In her opening remarks, the shadow Minister asked what planet Conservative Members are living on. I will tell her. We live in the real world, whereas it seems that Labour Members have been living under a rock. We have just emerged from the worst pandemic since 1918, a new disease that killed millions of people globally and as a result saw much of the international economy grind to a halt. That tragedy was compounded by the brutally evil ambitions of President Putin when he launched his illegal and inhumane invasion of Ukraine. Not only has his regime murdered countless innocent civilians; his actions have had a massive impact on energy prices, further adding to the cost pressures experienced globally. And that is just it: this is a global problem—not national, global.

The rise in the cost of living over the past year has impacted on all our constituents. Nobody denies that, least of all the Government. It is surely the very reason why the first of the Prime Minister's priorities is to halve inflation, which will, in and of itself, bring massive benefit to everybody who is struggling with rising prices and the cost of living. As the late and much-missed Baroness Thatcher said, "inflation devalues us all". As on so many issues, she was absolutely right.

The good news is that the Bank of England is clear that inflation will fall dramatically this year. Indeed, one of the biggest deflationary tools in the Government's extraordinary package to help my constituents with the cost of living was the energy price guarantee, which lowered bills for the vast majority of my constituents and the constituents of every single Member in this House. That has helped to curb the inflationary spike caused by what we are seeing day in, day out in Ukraine.

It is not just support with domestic energy on which the Government have helped my constituents. Fuel duty has been frozen for the 13th consecutive year, saving drivers some £200. Let us contrast that with what Labour is doing for people who drive. We need look no further than the Mayor of London. He is costing my constituents money with the ill thought through imposition of his new ultra low emission zone tax. People from Aylesbury who need to drive to parts of outer London for their work or for specialist hospital appointments will now have to pay £12.50 a day for the privilege—no help from the Labour Mayor with the cost of living.

[Rob Butler]

What have we done as a Government? We have come up with a package of support worth £94 billion—an average of £3,300 per household. As we have heard, Conservative Members recognise that we are supporting low-income households with £900 in cost of living payments, the first of which is finding its way into constituents' bank accounts from today. In Aylesbury, more than 10,000 stand to benefit from that assistance.

Growth and prosperity go hand in hand with improved productivity. That is what my constituents told me on Saturday that they want to see. I am so pleased that the Chancellor has rightly started work in that direction. In time, I would like to see the Government reverse measures on IR35 and reconsider the VAT threshold, because I believe that will help with those ambitions, but it has to come as our economy strengthens following the unprecedented shocks it received in recent times.

Labour offers the prospect of unfunded spending and higher debt. That is not a recipe to help people with the cost of living; it is a recipe for another letter from Labour telling us there is no money left. It is the Conservative party that will provide the short-term help and the long-term policies to enable the British people to enjoy greater prosperity now and far into the future. It is the Conservative Government who are building the stronger economy to help with the cost of living.

6.18 pm

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): There is a cost of living crisis in energy, food and other aspects. It is all part of a wider age of austerity being imposed on us by the few and inflicted on the many. It is, of course, affected by international matters, acknowledged by Members on both sides of the Chamber, which no Government could ignore. Fundamentally, however, political choices have been made, not just recently but over decades, that are causing the issues and the problem. It is not simply about the plight of the poorest, which I will come on to. The middle class is now being squeezed. I was in a rather prosperous town in my constituency speaking to a minister in a church where most parishioners would think of themselves as being at least on the ladder of prosperity. He was talking about the extent of poverty that people are feeling because mortgages are going up, and the fact that with the lack of increase in their wages, they cannot deal with the additional factors that are squeezing their income.

As well as the poor being impoverished, the middle class is now being impoverished. At the same time, let us remember that Brexit and covid, which the Government say have caused difficulties and plead as an excuse, have created millionaires and billionaires. People on the Government Benches and in the House of Lords have benefited significantly from political choices that have impacted on not just the poorest but the middle class.

My constituency is by no means the poorest part of Scotland. It is an energy-rich and food-rich area with arable land, yet there is food and energy poverty, which is shameful. The situation of food poverty was brought to my attention by the local food bank, which sent an email on 17 April saying:

“It's been a busy start to the year”.

Let us remember that we are not even one third into it. It continues:

“we've already sent out 1500 emergency food supplies to 3647 people supporting 1210 households in East Lothian. Last month...saw the highest demand ever for foodbank services with 565 emergency food supplies...1 in 3 people supported were children.”

Two thirds of those referred were people whose income was from benefits or work, but who simply could not make ends meet. That is the situation that we are in. It cannot be blamed simply upon Putin, or weather and other catastrophes. It is down to political choices that have been made, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), said, not simply in recent years with Brexit and covid but by Governments over decades. We have an energy-rich county—East Lothian has Torness power station and offshore wind at Cockenzie and Torness—yet we have fuel poverty to match the food poverty that exists. It is not simply that kids are going hungry—they are going cold. It is absurd, when the volume of energy we need is there in the fuels that exist in our community. It is all down to political choices.

I agree with a lot of the sentiment expressed from the Opposition Benches. This problem has been ongoing for decades. Change will not come in the local elections or in this Chamber. Change can come only when Scotland becomes an independent nation and ends the poverty forced upon our people for generations.

6.22 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak today, first to recognise the challenging times that we live in. Although Mansfield is increasingly affluent—average incomes have risen—there remain pockets of significant disadvantage and high levels of economic inactivity. In those pockets, poor health, poor housing and being out of the workforce contribute significantly to the challenges. It is not, as Labour would have us believe, a simple case of chucking a bit more money at people to fix it. These are complicated issues.

I am grateful for the wide range of Government support, including direct support for residents in the biggest welfare package in history, as far as I can tell. It includes increases in pensions, the halving of energy bills and the household support fund, which have helped a lot of people. We need to recognise that that is not sustainable. The Prime Minister is therefore right to look at reducing inflation and growing the economy. My community fundamentally needs better-paid jobs rather than subsidies. We need to make inroads into economic inactivity. I have spoken to the Department for Work and Pensions before about devolving powers to our local area to create packages that will support people into work that fits our local needs and priorities. I will see the Secretary of State about that shortly. At the very least, our new combined authority in the region should have the powers that Greater Manchester and the west midlands already have to deliver those packages. I have written to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities about that recently.

The Government are supporting growth in our region. Devolution is also an opportunity to boost life chances through jobs and infrastructure. In Mansfield we still have lower-paid employment than elsewhere. Transport links to other areas for jobs and investment, and attracting new jobs in growth sectors such as clean energy and

advanced manufacturing, are key. I have spoken in this place a lot about the £20 billion STEP—spherical tokamak for energy production—fusion investment as an example of huge Government investment. Our combined authority will give us the ability to wrap a local skills and education package and transport links around that, so that kids in Mansfield can have amazing opportunities that have not existed in our area for decades. North Nottinghamshire can power the country again. In turn, we can change lives. That is a powerful intervention from the Government to support people.

There are all sorts of great projects across Mansfield, Nottinghamshire and our region, including the freeport, our development company, spherical tokamak for energy production fusion, investment zones and our combined authority and transport projects. We all want bigger, quicker and better support for these projects, but they will sit under our combined authority to help us drive private sector growth and bring funding back into the Treasury, as well as create opportunities, which are important. Rather than talking about doing things, the biggest role for Government in growth is to undo some things in order to help small businesses to get on with business and reduce the regulatory burden.

It is important to clarify Opposition comments about council tax. Residents are reading national leaflets in relation to local elections and getting the impression that if they vote for Labour next week, their council tax will be frozen, which is nonsense. It is highly misleading and almost as if the Labour party is trying to dupe people into believing that. People expect local campaigners and candidates who are worthy of their trust, but in this case Labour is leading people up the garden path. It is important to get that on the record. In truth, the Labour party does not know what the policy will cost or what its impact on public services will be, because it does not understand the issues. That is what residents need to know in a week's time when they come to vote.

We all want to tackle rising costs, grow our economy and boost opportunities. Through the covid pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and other global events, the Government have continued to support people heavily through some of the biggest welfare interventions in this country's history. Obviously, that is not sustainable forever but the Prime Minister is right to focus on economic recovery and growth.

Rather than seeking to paint an increasingly bleak picture of Britain, as the Opposition consistently do, and acting as though everybody in our country lives in abject poverty and misery, which does not go down well with most of this country's voters, this Government are acting to help people who are struggling with the challenges of the cost of living and to boost growth and opportunity. While Labour Members pop up all over the place, pointing fingers and without any ideas of their own, the Prime Minister and this Government are actively supporting my constituents in an unprecedented way.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I want to get everybody in, which means that after the next speaker I will reduce the time limit to three minutes.

6.26 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): My constituents in Bolton South East, the 38th most deprived constituency in our country, need a Government and a council that will take the necessary steps to support them through the cost of living crisis.

The record of the Government of the last 13 years is clear. They are forcing through a 5% rise in council tax this spring; real wages have been squeezed since 2010; families are poorer than our European neighbours; the chaotic mini-Budget in September 2022 added £500 a month to first time buyers' costs; food prices in the United Kingdom are up 50% faster than elsewhere in the G7; and we have had 24 tax rises since 2019, meaning the burden on working families is now the highest in 70 years.

Then there is the record of the Conservative council in Bolton, which has been in control since 2019. It failed to even apply to the levelling-up fund and we missed out on the opportunity of £40 million in investment; the urban redevelopment of Crompton Place has been cancelled and housing development on Moor Lane has been downgraded; and Marks & Spencer, a huge employer in Bolton, has announced that it will be leaving our town as it is not feasible for it to continue because of the stalled regeneration.

Meanwhile, the Labour party has a real plan for Bolton South East and for the country at large. We will freeze council tax this year and cut energy bills, paid for through a proper windfall tax on the gas and oil giants that have made billions of pounds in profits. A Labour Government will support small businesses, paid for by an online sales tax, allowing them to lower prices for customers on the high street. Our Treasury team will reverse the Conservative decision to hand the richest 1% of pension savers a £1 billion pound handout. Those are our immediate plans.

This afternoon, we have heard many Members on the Government Benches talk about the financial credibility of a Labour Government and of the Labour party, so I want to take a little journey through time. In 2006, nine years after Labour came into power, the GDP-to-debt ratio was 40.5%. Germany's was 66.7% and France's was 64.6%, so we were still doing better than those two countries. In 2008, as everyone knows, there was an economic crash that started with the Lehman Brothers collapse in the USA, and there was a global recession. The then Labour Chancellor borrowed money to save our economy, and everybody knows, if they put their hand on their heart, that he did: he stopped about half a million people losing their jobs and avoided the banking crisis.

Between 1997 and 2010, we also made a record investment in health, in education and in police numbers. Some £19 billion was spent on renovating council homes that had been left in an appalling situation because of years of Conservative government. Let us have no lectures from Government Members about who is financially prudent, bearing in mind that last year their Prime Minister collapsed the entire economy.

6.30 pm

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): I want to move away from the sort of tribal politics and tribal speeches that we have heard from Opposition Members. I want to talk about some inspirational people, but before I get

[Paul Bristow]

away from partisan points, I think it is worth pointing out that 21,900 households will be £900 better off today as a result of what this Government have done.

I want to talk about the best thing about my city of Peterborough: the people of Peterborough. Last year, in the House of Commons, I brought together people from my city who I call my Peterborough heroes: people who volunteer their time to make their city a better place. I want to talk about some of those people.

I thank people from the Bretton project—people like Miriam Whittam, Rob Fisher and Erin McGuigan, who volunteer their own time to make Bretton a better place and who deserve our recognition. I thank organisations like Gladca, which has existed for 50 years in the heart of my city, supporting people and signposting them to the right services; I thank Yasmin Ilahi and Mr Mohammad Choudhary for all the work that they have done.

I thank Zillur Hussain, who gave thousands of meals to vulnerable people during the covid pandemic and who I took to Downing Street yesterday to say thank you very much. I thank people like Mr Rony Choudhury—[*Interruption.*] This is important. Opposition Members might not like it, but I am recognising people in my constituency: people like Rony Choudhury, the owner of the Bombay Brasserie, who did exactly the same thing. Perhaps Opposition Members do not think that those people's contribution is worth while. I thank people like Ed Walker, who runs the charity Hope into Action, which helps prison leavers into stable accommodation. [*Interruption.*] I do not know why Opposition Members are chuntering from a sedentary position. These people are heroes.

I thank people like Julie Gooding and Sharon Keogh from the Care Zone, which ensures that households have decent furniture. I thank people like Cocoa Fowler, who runs the charity Food for Nought, which provides food banks with food such as soup that would otherwise have been thrown out from supermarkets and which is supporting people. I thank people like Christine Nice, who runs the WestRaven community café and helps her community. I thank people like Erin Lee and Maureen and Jeff Walters from the Thorney food bank; Steven Pettican from the Garden House; and Moez Nathu from the charity PARCA, the Peterborough Asylum and Refugee Community Association. I thank Snow and I thank Petr Torák from the charity COMPAS. I thank Bernadetta Omondi, Faustina Yang and Louise Ravenscroft, who have all helped people in my city.

Opposition Members are dismissing these people as if they do not matter. I suggest that they go into their communities, find heroes and recognise them. They should use their position as Members of Parliament to say thank you to the people who work in their community. The idea that a Labour Government would solve any of these problems, quite frankly, is just insulting.

6.33 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): It does not matter how loud Government Members shout and scream, "Crisis, what crisis?". It does not matter how many times they repeat themselves. This crisis is devastating our communities. It is killing people in our communities. Believe me: the records are there to prove it.

I am not sure whether people have seen the latest television advertisement from Age UK. A lady is sitting in her house. It is so cold that you can see her breath. She is on the phone saying, "I am really worried because I cannot afford to put the heating on. What am I going to do?". What have we become in this country? What have we become, when that sort of thing is being broadcast on television?

There is poverty in every one of our constituencies. Families sitting around the table of a night-time—people who are working their socks off, working all sorts of hours—are not talking about GDP, RPI, CPI, the G7 or predictions about the financial situation. They are saying, "How can we afford to put the heating on? How can we afford to eat properly? How can I afford to put shoes on the bairns? How can I afford to give them the right sort of clothing for school?". That is what people are talking about. Government Members can shout, "Crisis, what crisis?", as loud as they want, but it is alive and kicking in our communities. The police have informed me that theft in my constituency is on the increase, but people are not stealing the normal types of goods; they are stealing to survive. A local GP demanded to see me to tell me that I needed to see how bad some of the conditions are that people have been pushed into because of the Government's policies. It is frightening, it really is.

Food banks are a Tory invention, of course, but I must say a big thank you to the food banks in my area—Wansbeck Valley, Bedlington, Real Deal and the Biggin Box. Everyone working in them deserves great credit. However, the food banks are drying up; the people who used to donate now want to use food banks themselves. This simply cannot go on.

Child poverty is a huge issue for me. In my constituency, it has gone up by 9.5% in five years, to 35.2%. The fact that there are empty bellies and poorly shod children in this country is an absolute disgrace. We are one of the richest countries in the world; let us use it wisely.

6.36 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): If wages had continued to increase at just their pre-2008 rate, workers would have been £233 a week better off last year than they are now, and that figure is expected to increase to £304 per week by 2027. There is a yawning chasm between what working people could have benefited from and what they are experiencing now. Imagine what the world would have been like if that wage rise had continued.

It is a staggering fact that average incomes will lag behind those in Poland by the end of the decade if we carry on as we are. Ours is not a poor country—we have one of the biggest economies in the world—but when so many of our citizens have to scrape from day to day just to make ends meet, we have to ask some fundamental questions about why it has gone so wrong. It seems pretty clear to me that the experiment with trickle-down economics has been conclusively proved to be a failure, that the Government can no longer be a bystander in our economic renewal, and that the economic shocks of the past 12 months could have been much more effectively mitigated.

Let us look at what is happening around the world. With his Inflation Reduction Act, President Biden is taking steps to prepare the United States for an extremely challenging future. We have nothing approaching that

scale or that ambition, at least not from the Government Benches, but those of us on the Labour Benches do have ambition. We are ready to face the challenges of global competition and climate change; we are seeking to reduce our dependence on fragile international supply chains with our plans to buy, make and sell more in Britain; we will have a real go at funding the step change in home insulation that is needed for this year's and every subsequent year's energy bills; and we will end the chronic disease of low-paid, insecure employment.

It is pretty clear that we need to do more to improve people's earnings in this country, and one way of doing that is to empower workers to negotiate their terms and conditions through sectoral collective bargaining. Wherever we look in the world, when trade unions are empowered to negotiate on behalf of their members, people's earnings tend to be higher.

When I look at what my children and their generation are facing, I see their wages continuing to fall behind everyday costs, with endemic job insecurity and companies gaming the system so that they do have any rights, let alone the ability to get on and progress in their chosen fields. More and more of their wages go on meeting the basics of living, which puts into the realms of fantasy the idea that they might be able to save up for a home of their own one day, or even—heaven forbid—save for their retirement. That is not the future that I want for my children, or for anyone's children. We have to do something to halt the country's slide into mediocrity, where ambition is stymied before people even start because the way in which the economy is structured means that the bulk of the nation's wealth never leaves the top rung.

We cannot go on like this, with people working harder but seeing their cash go less and less far so that it becomes a stretch even to pay for essentials, while their tax burden increases and public services continue to deteriorate. If we were still in Europe, we would be the sick man of it. We cannot keep asking people to pay more for less. Something has to change, and it should be the Government.

6.39 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Families, businesses and the country are struggling. For too long, Government support has been too little and too late. During the pandemic, we would have fared much better if the health service had not had its money cut every year since the Conservatives came into Government. The energy crisis has also had a huge impact on our economy. Britain is the only major G7 economy that is still smaller than it was before the pandemic. The country is going backwards under this Government. Many families are having to fork out an extra £500 in mortgage payments following the disastrous Conservative Budget last year that crashed the country's economy. This is real money; it is the real lives of our constituents, and people are facing real hardship. This is not an abstract statistic, yet instead of doing something to help families, the Government are cutting funding to councils. Even last year, they introduced stricter eligibility for free school meals.

I have the honour of representing a constituency that spans two councils: St Helens and Knowsley. They are wonderful places with a strong sense of community spirit, but there is no denying that the Conservative

Government's decisions have taken their toll over the past 13 years and caused real hardship. As they are the second and 22nd least well-off council areas in the country, the offer of support that is too little, too late is being felt by my constituents, particularly the vulnerable people, children and people with disabilities.

In 2010, central Government funding to St Helens was £127 million. This year, it is £11 million. In Knowsley, the second poorest council area in the country, the council's funding has been cut by £485 per person since 2010, despite the average across the country being £188. It is the second poorest area in the country. These cuts have consequences. Local authorities have duties that they have a legal requirement to fulfil, but even with a council tax rise, services have had to be rationed in many areas. We are raising council taxes during the biggest cost of living crisis in a generation, and working people already face the highest tax burden in 70 years.

The Government should have learned their lesson by now after acting too little and too late over the pandemic and the energy crisis. Families and businesses could be crushed if the Government do not get there quickly enough with the support that is needed, but I doubt they will do it. This is real money that could be in the pockets of our constituents while the cost of the average weekly shop is skyrocketing. The Government need to cut business rates to help revitalise businesses. There is no denying that short-term support is required, but there is also a need for long-term council funding. The fair funding review has been delayed for too long. Who is benefiting? The better-off areas are benefiting at the expense of my constituents—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We need to bring in the last Back-Bench speaker.

6.42 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): It is exactly 12 months since I conducted a cost of living survey in my constituency. The results were absolutely shocking, with 90% of constituents feeling worse off than in the previous 12 months, 80% struggling to pay their bills and over 80% reporting that their mental health had been impacted by the cost of living crisis. Since then, this Tory Government have done absolutely nothing to ease those pressures, and people's situations are much worse. The cost of living crisis is a political choice.

In the brief time that I have to speak, I will focus on pay and prices. The cost of living is being driven by inflation exceeding incomes—prices are outstripping pay. Millions of people, particularly in the public sector, are having pay awards imposed on them that are below the rate of inflation, and people are being forced—yes, forced—to go on strike. The Government simply do not care. With inflation outstripping pay, month after month, there is an urgent priority for this Government to inflation-proof pay for the public sector and all workers as a short-term measure in the cost of living crisis. I will continue to stand in solidarity with trade unions seeking that outcome.

Turning to food prices, the Office for National Statistics reported last week that food prices were driving inflation. Food prices have increased 19.2% over the past year, but key staples have increased by much more. The impact of this is clear, as others have said today. Food banks in my

[Beth Winter]

constituency, like those everywhere else in the country, are seeing more and more people arriving for food, including at the food bank where I volunteered for more than 12 months, which has had an astronomical increase in the number of people turning up on the doorstep. This is shameful—shameful—for the Government, and it is why I have felt compelled in the last month to work with our local trades council to raise nearly £2,500 for the food bank, but we should not have to do that in the world's fifth richest nation. It is an absolute disgrace.

Yet the supermarkets are doing very well. We hear that Tesco has paid more than £1 billion in dividend payments to shareholders when most people in this country are struggling. It is not right that supermarkets continue to make hundreds of millions of pounds in profits at the expense of ordinary households.

I finish with a quote from a constituent, “Why are the rich continuing to get richer in this country while the rest of us suffer? I do not see any point in living. Sadly, as usual, the Tories are deaf and just do not care.” I implore the Government to wake up and listen to the majority of people in this country and take urgent action to address this cost of living crisis.

6.45 pm

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): After 13 years of Conservative Government, do the people of Britain feel better off? As my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) put it, the answer is a resounding no. Across the country, families and individuals are seeing their bills rise while their pay packet falls, and they are faced with a Government who are only making the problem worse. We must remember that the shocking decisions made over the past year, be it the mini-Budget that crashed our economy or the pension reforms that cut taxes for the 1%, only further entrenched 13 years of failure and mismanagement.

That economic record and the Government's failure have left the UK exposed to skyrocketing price increases. Working people are facing soaring bills, rising food prices and higher taxes. Meanwhile the Government have inflicted a Tory mortgage premium on first-time buyers that has increased costs by £500 a month for some households, forced a 5% rise in council tax this spring by reducing funding to councils, and introduced a permanent tax cut for the wealthiest 1% of pension savers by changing pension allowances. As my hon. Friends have powerfully illustrated, these decisions continue to have a devastating impact on people across the country.

My hon. Friends the Members for Bootle (Peter Dowd), for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter), for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer), for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) all talked about how people are worse off after 13 years of Tory Government. Even the hon. Member for Wantage (David Johnston) said that the cost of living crisis is the No. 1 issue on the doorstep. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) talked about how the cost of living crisis is affecting disabled people in such a cruel way.

My hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) talked about how the Welsh Government are moving heaven and earth to help constituents. This is what a difference a Labour Government make.

People who walk down a local high street today are likely to see pubs, independent shops or even bank branches shutting their doors as soaring inflation and energy bills make their businesses near impossible to run. They might go into a local supermarket and be shocked at the price tickets accompanying everyday items. The price of eggs is up by a third, the price of milk is up by a third and the price of sugar is up by 42%. And at the end of the street they might see a food bank where local people generously volunteer their time to help members of their community in need.

That is the reality of 13 years of Conservative Government. Hard-working families and individuals are struggling to make ends meet, are having to cut back to only essential spending, and are deciding whether they can afford to take their children on holiday this summer or go out for a meal with friends on their birthday. Businesses, suffering under the weight of price rises, are looking at their balance sheets and having to take incredibly difficult decisions. High streets are on the decline. The fabric of the community is breaking down. I know that hon. Members on both sides of the House will recognise that picture. The UK has lost 6,000 pubs, 4,000 local shops and more than 9,000 bank branches since 2010. The Government have presided over and led that managed decline, and now the UK is right at the bottom of the pack, with dismal growth forecasts and no plan to steady the ship. Instead, despite fast-rising prices, wages are stagnating while the tax burden reaches its highest point in 70 years, with 24 tax rises since 2019—I repeat: 24 tax rises since 2019.

For first-time buyers, the Tory mortgage premium has added up to £500 a month to their bills, as the Conservative mini-Budget wrecked the economy and saw interest rates rise and markets losing confidence. That first step up the ladder as people start a family and settle into the community has been put out of reach. What should be a time of excitement and joy has been reduced to one of anxiety and disappointment, and this is before we consider the impact of the many other tax rises coming down the path. Council tax bills have risen above £2,000 for the first time, with the Government forcing councils to put up rates by reducing their funding, seeing families hit with an average rise of 5.1%. Bills are landing on the doormat while parents hide their fear from their children upstairs.

That is the reality of 13 years of a Conservative Government and the time for change is now. But instead of focusing on the interests of working people, the Chancellor's main offer has been a tax cut for some of the wealthiest pension savers. While he refuses to take action, it is clear that the British people deserve much better. What is needed is a change of direction. What is needed is a Labour Government—a Labour Government who will create good jobs across every part of the country. We will make Britain a world leader in the industries of the future and ensure that people have the skills to benefit from these opportunities. A Labour Government would today freeze council tax and cut business rates to ease the cost of living crisis, supporting businesses and consumers to thrive. That is the choice facing the country and that is why it is time for a Labour Government.

6.51 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith):

This is a Government who will always support those who need it the most, a Government on the side of working families and a Government who are implementing generational, landmark policies to get the economy growing and ensure that everyone shares in its success. Just look at the impact of decisions made from the autumn statement 2022 onwards. It shows beyond doubt that Government support for households in 2023-24 provides low-income households with the largest benefit in cash terms and as a percentage of income. In fact, on average, households in the bottom half of income distribution will see twice the benefit of households in the top half, in cash terms. Because of the rises in tax thresholds introduced by successive Conservative Governments, for the first time ever, people in our country can earn £1,000 a month without paying a penny of tax or national insurance.

I thank my right hon. and hon. Friends for their contributions: my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom); and my hon. Friends the Members for Guildford (Angela Richardson); for Poole (Sir Robert Syms); for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes); for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer); for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew); for Wantage (David Johnston), for Aylesbury (Rob Butler); for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) and for Peterborough (Paul Bristow). They all made salient comments about the support this Government are giving at this time when the cost of living has been rising.

As my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury reminded us, the best way we can help people get through a period of rising prices is by bearing down on inflation. At the same time, we are cutting debt and growing the economy, which is the best way to lift living standards. But we also know at this time that some people need additional, targeted support. In the face of cost of living headwinds, we demonstrated our values by protecting struggling families with a £2,500 energy price guarantee, one-off payments and the uprating of benefits. Aside from the measures on energy, we made changes that mean the average driver has saved about £200 in total since the 5p fuel duty cut was introduced.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The Minister speaks about the support the Government have given in terms of the cost of living payment. Why is it then that, when someone has already been punished with a sanction, the Government punish them twice by not giving them the cost of living payment?

Andrew Griffith: I understand that the hon. Member and his party are not happy campers these days, but we are giving more money per head to households in Scotland than we are in the rest of the United Kingdom, which is why he should get behind the many benefits of being part of this Union. On this very day, more than 8 million families across the United Kingdom will receive in their accounts a £301 cost of living payment from the Government, and that is just the first of three payments that will be made, giving a total of £900 to low-income and vulnerable families.

One measure that touches almost everyone in this country is childcare. In the Budget, we on the Conservative Benches confirmed the biggest expansion of free childcare

in living memory. Our new offer will close the gap between parental leave ending and the current childcare offer. It will reduce costs for parents who can get back to work and make sure that a career break does not become a career end. It will improve the lives of millions of people. It is the right thing to do, but we can only afford to do that because of the fiscal discipline that we have exercised.

I am delighted that, as people go to the polls next week, the Opposition have given them a reminder of where they stand, for which I am grateful. Conservative councils charge £80 a year less than Labour on a band E property. Under the last Labour Government, council tax doubled. Under Labour Wales, it has more than trebled. Not for the first time, Labour says one thing and does another. Its motion today calls for a council tax freeze, and yet, far from freezing, I looked at the increases in every one of the constituencies of those on the Opposition Front Bench: Leeds up 5%; Wolverhampton up 5%; Camden up 5%; Ealing up 5%; Greenwich up 5%. A full house of Labour councils charging the maximum that they are allowed in council tax.

Enough, Madam Deputy Speaker: enough of the Opposition giving us rhetoric not record; enough of the economic illiteracy from Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen; and enough of these ChatGPT-does-socialism-type speeches that we have heard this afternoon. We should never forget Labour's record on the economy: working people and your children pay the price. Labour has ditched its rule not to borrow to fund day-to-day spending, so we know its plan to stick billions on the nation's credit card. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members can intervene if I am incorrect. No Labour Government have ever left office with unemployment lower than when they came to power. Under the last Labour Government, unemployment rose from 2.1 million in 1997 to 2.5 million by the time they left office in 2010—more people denied the security and the chance in life of a good job.

Finally, let us never forget, when Labour left office in 2010, how the then Chief Secretary wrote—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] What did he write? He wrote:

"Dear Chief Secretary, I'm afraid there's no money left."

We are a Government focused on delivering the British people's priorities. We are making sure that we are helping those in financial strain. We are focused on the future and we are delivering not just for growth that comes when a country emerges from a downturn, but for long-term sustainable healthy growth.

Since the Conservative Government came into power in 2010, we have grown more than major economies such as France, Italy or Japan and around the same as Europe's largest economy, Germany. We have halved unemployment. We have cut inequality and reduced the number of workless households left to us by 1 million. Output is now higher than pre-pandemic levels. There is still much to do, but we are on track to deliver—

Sir Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab) *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Question put accordingly (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 214, Noes 288.

Division No. 219]**[6.59 pm****AYES**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Barker, Paula
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bonnar, Steven
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Sir Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clark, Feryal (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Crawley, Angela
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Daby, Janet
 Dalton, Ashley
 David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farry, Stephen
 Fellows, Marion
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flynn, Stephen
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Furniss, Gill
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Linden, David
 Lloyd, Tony (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Lockhart, Carla
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 MacAskill, Kenny
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael

Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Monaghan, Carol
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, James
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Reed, Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robinson, Gavin
 Rodda, Matt
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Alyn
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Sultana, Sarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Twigg, Derek
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Liz Twist and
Taiwo Owatemi**

NOES

Adams, rh Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, rh Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baker, Duncan
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Simon

Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dinenege, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, rh James
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alistair
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian (*Proxy vote cast by Craig Mackinlay*)
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McVey, rh Esther

Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, rh Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec

Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Warburton, David (*Proxy vote cast by Craig Mackinlay*)
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Whately, Helen
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Noes:

Fay Jones and
 Robert Largan

Question accordingly negated.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)),
 That the proposed words be there added.

The House divided: Ayes 285, Noes 0.

Division No. 220]

[7.13 pm

AYES

Adams, rh Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, rh Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baker, Duncan
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baynes, Simon

Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dinene, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael

Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, rh John
 Gove, rh Michael
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, rh James
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian

Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian (*Proxy vote cast by Craig Mackinlay*)
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, rh Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom

Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David (*Proxy vote cast by Craig Mackinlay*)
 Warren, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Whately, Helen
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Ayes:

Fay Jones and
 Robert Largin

NOES

Tellers for the Noes:

Sir Robert Goodwill and
 Chris Clarkson

Question accordingly agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to (Standing Order No. 31(2)).

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the Government's action to halve inflation, grow the economy and reduce debt; supports the Government's extensive efforts to support families up and down the country with the cost of living through significant support to help with rising prices, worth an average of £3,300 per household including direct cash payments of at least £900 to the eight million most vulnerable households; notes the use of a windfall tax on energy firm's profits to pay around half of the typical family's energy bill through the Energy Price Guarantee, also notes the fact that the Government has frozen fuel duty for 13 consecutive years to support motorists; welcomes the expansion of free childcare to all eligible parents of children aged nine months to four years old; and notes that Labour will fail to grip inflation or boost economic growth, with their plans for the economy simply leading to unfunded spending, higher debt and uncontrolled migration.

Business without Debate

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With the leave of the House, I will take motions 3 and 4 together.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

COMPANIES

That the draft Register of Overseas Entities (Definition of Foreign Limited Partner, Protection and Rectification) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 15 March, be approved.

POLICE, CRIME, SENTENCING AND COURTS

That the draft Code of Practice on the Recording and Retention of Personal Data in relation to Non-Crime Hate Incidents, which was laid before this House on 13 March, be approved.—(*Andrew Stephenson.*)

Question agreed to.

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL (2 AND 9 MAY)

Ordered,

That, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 10(2)(b)—

(a) the sitting in Westminster Hall on Tuesday 2 May shall begin at 3.30pm and may continue for up to three hours; and

(b) the sitting in Westminster Hall on Tuesday 9 May shall begin at 11.30am, shall be suspended from 1.30pm to 4.30pm, and may then continue for up to a further three hours.—(*Andrew Stephenson.*)

City Centre Security Measures and Access for Disabled People

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Andrew Stephenson.)

7.24 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to have been granted the opportunity to have this debate. The centre of York is a special place. It is one that my community really values, with its amenities and services, its heritage and its friendships. Imagine someone being told that they are no longer allowed entrance. Why? Because they are a disabled person. Disabled not by the debilitating impairment that they have learned to live with, but “dis-abled” because the new security barriers prevent them using the blue badge access on which they depend. For some, alternatives may be found, but if their vehicle is their only means of transport and Motability alternatives do not work for them—or if it is where they store their medicines or equipment, such as a nebuliser, or it is their safe space—then being denied entry takes away their human rights and dignity.

We had these debates decades ago, resulting in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. We understand the social model of disability, which is about the barriers—in this case, literally barriers—that prevent people from living their life without detriment. People are now locked out of their city not because they have an impairment, but because of intransigence within the local authority or authoritarians within it not recognising their basic human rights. As if life was not hard enough already, that one moment in the week when they go to the bank or post office, meet a friend for a coffee, or go to church or the cinema is now forbidden. Even the St Sampson's centre, a specialist social space for older people, is cordoned off. It is discrimination.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent opening to her speech. Does she agree that a local authority seeking to ban disabled people from being able to access the centre of York amounts, pure and simple, to direct discrimination? It is a breach of their civil and human rights, and if the local authority were to rethink this, it would lift that ban and remove the barriers so that disabled people can freely access the city within which they live.

Rachael Maskell: I am really grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point so powerfully, because this is an infringement of somebody's rights and it is discrimination.

While the UN General Assembly and special rapporteur say that human rights and security are not in conflict, but complement each other, those with a poor knowledge of human rights have set them against each other. Tonight, I want to set the scene in York and say what the Government need to do to uphold human rights while strengthening security, as Labour would.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I commend the hon. Lady, who in her time in this House has been an assiduous and dedicated MP? I think her constituents should be very proud of her actions, and indeed of what she is doing here tonight.

[Jim Shannon]

Does the hon. Lady not agree that, while we have come on in leaps and bounds in improving disabled access and taking action to legislate for disabled people, there is a need for greater awareness of disability needs? She has outlined this specific case, which I believe shows discrimination and bias. I hope that the Government and the Minister, who I believe are responsive and sympathetic to what the hon. Lady is saying, will act to ensure that she gets what she needs on behalf of her constituents.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful for the hon. Member's intervention. We should not have to be having this debate here tonight, but we are, and we are determined to see the ban reversed.

Nice and Berlin witnessed hostile vehicle terrorism in 2016 and Barcelona, Westminster and others in 2017—we will never forget—so, following discussions, the police, the counter-terrorism unit and what is now the National Protective Security Authority believed that York needed protections. The minster was the first out of the blocks, as blocks were literally put around that magnificent cathedral to prevent vehicle incursion. Discussions also suggested that some thoroughfares might present a risk and needed further mitigation. Years passed and nothing happened, so clearly urgency was not apparent. In June 2020, barriers suddenly appeared without any consultation. That was due not to terrorist threats, but to covid and the need for social distancing. No one talked to disabled people. They were locked out by section 18 of the Traffic Order Procedure (Coronavirus) (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2020, which provided for a temporary ban for blue badge holders. We were then told by Green party councillors that it was because that was better for the environment, as if disabled people caused climate change and did not also want to save the planet. Then the barriers were for street cafés, to aid covid recovery, as opposed to ensuring that disabled people could spend their “purple pound” in York.

In November 2021, the Liberal Democrat-led City of York Council applied under the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 for a traffic regulation order, under which a counter-terrorism jurisdiction must

“avoid danger to persons or other traffic using the road.”

Any jurisdiction with any sense would recognise that protecting the environment, the economy, safety and blue badge holder access are not mutually exclusive things, but are complementary. If security was genuinely such an issue, what about all the other inconsistencies, such as the patchwork CCTV, with some cameras switched off, or the commercial vehicle access available when barriers are in place? Why can bollards simply be lifted out of their portals at any time, and why do bin vans sit with engines running? Why do the barriers lift at 5 pm when the streets are crowded, while at 10.30 am, when it is quiet, those barriers are down? I am not questioning the threat; I am questioning the logic.

Before a traffic regulation order is made, a council must comply with statutory requirements set out in the Local Authorities' Traffic Orders (Procedure) (England and Wales) Regulations 1996. Those include a requirement for formal consultation and advertisement, which the council undertook in a short summer consultation period in 2021. More than 200 objections were registered. The

local government and social care ombudsman responded, saying that York's council had failed to respond to the consultation. Instead, the council argued that because 60% of disabled people had responded in support of the plans, that was sufficient to implement them. Not all respondents lived in York, and the nature of their impairment was not clear. Rather than exploring what mitigation the 40% required, the authority homogenised disabled people. Human rights law makes it clear that majority preferences cannot simply override those of minority groups. In December 2021, The Department for Transport's best practice guide, “Inclusive Mobility”, was published, but those criteria were not met either. We must take a holistic approach to protecting people, not just through hostile vehicle mitigation, but from damaging infringement on human rights.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. As a neighbouring MP, I support every point she has put forward. She is right to raise the point about the social isolation this is causing for people with disabilities who need access to our great city and its centre. Does she agree that there is also huge discrimination against rural communities? People from those communities with blue badges who need access to the city centre cannot access it at the moment because they do not have the required public transport. A lot of small rural communities are being left behind because of this policy.

Rachael Maskell: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that disabled people are more likely to experience loneliness—13% more likely—and because York is both urban and rural, the people living in communities in his constituency will also experience detriment. As we look across York, we know that security risks need to be addressed, but so do people's human rights.

We live in a troubled world. Risks present themselves every day around the globe and here at home, and we must do all we can to keep our communities safe. There is no point in saying “if only” at the inquest when we had the chance to rechart the course of history. I understand risk and I want my city to be safe for all who enter. Mitigation must be proportionate and effective. But let us be clear: disabled people are not terrorists, yet they are the ones being excluded.

Imagine a sign saying “No disabled people”. Yet that is what York has sunk to: denying dignity to the 60-plus people who every day depend on their blue badge to access the city. My plea to the Minister is that blue badge holders need his help. In York, the council is clearly out of its depth. Some places have got this right and others horribly wrong. This is a very specialist area of policy, and central Government need to provide the specialism that localities do not have.

Barricades around our ancient city are nothing new. The centre already has the world-renowned wall, which makes for an enjoyable walk for those who can access it. There are 8 million visitors a year and just over 200,000 people living in York, and 34,592 residents identified as a disabled person in the 2021 census and around 7,000 have been issued with a blue badge, granting access and parking to reach shops, services, open spaces and entertainment across our city centre and beyond.

We have a heavy responsibility to ensure safety, but also to ensure that disabled people are not denied their rights. The latter has been poorly understood. A Labour

Government would ensure that every town and city is safe and secure, and reverse the ban in York. I have been talking to my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon), who says that it does not have to be this way. Access for blue badge holders has been facilitated there, overcoming the very issues that York has failed to grasp. Chester, the first British city to win the coveted European access city award for balancing safety and access, provides for access at barriers, which close only when risk is identified. Essential businesses and blue badge residents are on the list for access, and even visitors can apply in advance. Its infrastructure provides safety and access, and Chester understands the importance of involving and working with disabled people in planning.

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her comments about Chester. I have to ask why on earth City of York Council has not followed Cheshire West and Chester Council's excellent example in this matter. Our city centre scheme has been worked on since late 2017. At every single step of the way, my council's fantastic officers have worked assiduously with the access officer, the equalities team and, most importantly, disabled people themselves to accommodate their needs while balancing the imperatives of the wider security environment. The council has the powers, but uses them extremely sparingly. Indeed, they have been activated only three times. This measure should not be used as a barrier to disabled people leading their day-to-day lives.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her comments. Inclusion is about the co-production of outcomes. Chester is able, but the Liberal Democrat York administration has failed to commit to measures and is therefore barring disabled people from being able to access their city.

Turning to the law, I am grateful to the world-leading Centre for Applied Human Rights at the University of York, which produced an outstanding report, and to the Reverse the Ban campaign to provide access to disabled people. The UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, a human rights treaty, binds national and local jurisdictions, stating:

"Disabled people must never be treated less favourably than others, excluded from or denied access to services, education, work or social life on the basis of their disability."

and must have access

"on an equal basis to non-disabled people".

Further, it states that

"Disabled people's full and effective participation and inclusion in society must be supported".

With the combination of the Equality Act 2010 and the Human Rights Act 1998, the rights of disabled people cannot be dismissed. Disabled people, under articles 8 and 14 of the Human Rights Act, have a right to participate in essential economic, social, cultural and leisure activities. Any limitations for security must be proportionate and inclusive. The Equality Act 2010 is even more relevant as it places a duty on public authorities to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people to exercise their rights and to

"advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic, and those who do not."

Case law clarifies that public authorities must have due regard for the impact on elderly and disabled people when imposing parking restrictions. York fails that test.

There were two equality impact assessments. The first, in June 2020, said that there was no infringement on human rights, yet it recognised that blue badge holders would be barred from the city. In November 2020 there was recognition of the breach, but no mitigation and no compelling reason for justification.

Removing the ability to drive and park in the streets will increase the distance that people with reduced mobility have to travel. They will be locked out of their city. Above all, under the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, the Government must ensure that the built environment is usable by disabled people on an equal basis to others. I recognise that that is difficult, but rather than the authorities making mistakes akin to York's, the Government must intervene and assist.

First, funding is key to making places accessible. Infrastructure is not cheap, and project costs invariably spiral. We need Government funding and backing to support local authorities at risk. Secondly, security risks change, so continuous support must be available. A central unit of expertise that works with local partners with a strong understanding of security and the impact on human rights is essential. York needs an integrated security audit and plan, and the Government should assist it.

Thirdly, disabled people must be involved in the design of any consultation and subsequent mitigation measures. City of York Council ran three consultations, including one focused on disabled people and representative groups. In addition to wider infrastructure enhancements, public transport and information, it recognised the rights of disabled people. York then ignored them. Fourthly, there is a clear need for co-production of hostile vehicle mitigation measures, ensuring that safety and human rights obligations are met. Solving conflicts together produces stronger outcomes.

I believe that York must stop digging in and start listening, like Chester. Here is my proposal. Blue badges are identified to a person, not a vehicle. At barrier entry points, they can be shown to security personnel or a camera. Additional security—a password, identification or a QR code—could act as secondary security. That is a tried and tested method when operating security zones. Visitors will have to pre-register, but that is not arduous. It is simple, safe and secure, and it protects the city and human rights. York's plans will deny access to disabled people between 10:30 am and 5 pm. Many disabled people find mornings difficult, and by 5 pm the shops and amenities will be closed. It is simply shameful that blue badge holders are locked out. The council executives should hang their heads in disgrace.

A Labour Government would not tolerate that and would reverse the ban. The Minister needs to intervene urgently with his expertise to keep people safe and enable people to be dignified in their city. I want him to work with me, halt the engineering works that commenced yesterday at a cost of £3.5 million to local people, and provide oversight, as York's safety and access is of national concern. Getting it right in York will set a blueprint for elsewhere. Labour has already forced the administration to appoint an access officer and set up an access forum, but due to the abysmal record of the authority on equalities, I argue that an equality scrutiny committee needs to be established, so that all the authority's work is examined and non-discriminatory mitigation is put in place.

[*Rachael Maskell*]

My sincere thanks go to the 27 organisations representing disabled people, older people and allied and related organisations campaigning to reverse the ban, and to Flick Williams, who is a tour de force when speaking on behalf of disabled people to secure their human rights. The embarrassment is that York became the UK's first UNESCO human rights city in 2017. This year it holds the prestigious international chair for human rights cities. My well-researched proposal would remedy the council's shaming of York. I ask the Minister to intervene and to join me not only to immediately reverse the ban but to strengthen security and access, so we can all live safely and with dignity.

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that there is a chance at the ballot box? I believe that York has local elections. Would she encourage the residents of York to make their views on this matter known to the various candidates?

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and, of course, this is a big issue for our city. It is imperative that people seriously consider where they put their crosses on 4 May, as that provides an opportunity to reverse the ban. If the Lib Dem-Green council will not reverse the ban, clearly the people of York must speak.

I close with the words of Dame Judi Dench:

"York city centre is a rare jewel that should be free for all to enjoy, including those with a disability and for whom accessible parking is essential... I should like to offer my wholehearted support to people in the City of York".

I ask the Minister to offer his support too.

7.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): I start by conveying my sincere appreciation to the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for calling the debate and for speaking so powerfully on behalf of her constituents, especially those who have been adversely affected by the installation of bollards, the removal of blue badge parking in York city centre and the many other issues she highlighted.

I thank the hon. Members for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr Lord), for their contributions to the debate. I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy), who is no longer in his place, for his contribution. I know he has similarly strong views to those articulated by the hon. Member for York Central. Both the hon. Members who represent the city of York are committed champions of the residents and businesses that call York home, and I know they share our ambition for that fine city, in the heart of the northern powerhouse, to continue to grow and flourish in the long term.

York attracts over 8 million tourists from home and abroad every year. We know the visitor economy is vital for the city, but it also causes the types of questions, challenges, trade-offs and considerations that the hon. Lady so eloquently espoused in her speech. An appropriate balance clearly needs to be struck, so in my response

I want to provide clarity about the Government's role and responsibility, while outlining some of the work around accessibility for disabled residents in York, and indeed in all our towns and cities.

First, I will talk about the UK shared prosperity funding, from which some money has been contributed to the work that has been discussed. I will then talk about accessibility and finally about blue badge parking.

As the hon. Lady will know, appreciate and accept, empowering places to identify and build on their own strengths and needs is a core tenet of the levelling-up agenda, which is why the UK shared prosperity fund is giving York £5 million. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that improving infrastructure costs money and takes time. The fund will help neighbourhoods and create more high-skilled, high-wage jobs of the future.

As the hon. Lady outlined, clear concerns have been expressed about the changes that have made to some of the projects, including the perceived heavy handed use of bollards that restrict accessibility for people in wheelchairs. In rolling out the UK shared prosperity fund, we have been clear that we want to give local areas the maximum amount of local discretion. The essence of devolution is affording local areas the freedom to forge their own path, but with rights come responsibilities.

The hon. Lady has expounded the concerns that she and many others have about the course of action that has been outlined so far by City of York Council. The Government have always been unequivocal in saying that our high streets must be open and accessible to everyone. Local authorities have a duty, under section 122 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984, to exercise their functions in securing the

"expeditious, convenient and safe movement of traffic."

Although councils are ultimately free to make their own decisions about the streets under their care, they need to take into account the relevant legislation. They are also responsible for ensuring that their actions are within the law. They are accountable to local people for their decisions, and indeed for their performance. There is no specific requirement for local authorities to use bollards; it is for each council to decide the most appropriate way to resolve these challenges.

Blue badge parking is a similar case. I know that the hon. Lady has been a champion of reversing the ban on blue badge parking since it was introduced in the city's pedestrian zones as part of the measures introduced in 2021. I appreciate that the resident-led campaign has won the support of others, including Dame Judi Dench, as the hon. Lady outlined in her conclusion.

The blue badge scheme is a lifeline for many disabled people. It helps approximately 2.5 million people in England to remain independent, while preventing social isolation. The Department for Transport has published several documents and some non-statutory guidance for councils on how the scheme should operate. One such document, as the hon. Lady outlined, is "Inclusive Mobility: A Guide to Best Practice on Access to Pedestrian and Transport Infrastructure", which sets out the provision that should be made for parking spaces. It states:

"Creating and maintaining an accessible public realm is crucial for ensuring that disabled people are not excluded from playing a full role in society... Inclusive design requires that the needs of all disabled people are considered from the outset of any transport and pedestrian infrastructure".

Personally, I would strongly encourage the city of York to think carefully about reconciling the understandable challenges with which it has to grapple, which we all recognise—the hon. Lady was careful to articulate and highlight them in her speech—with an approach that meets the rights of disabled people in the way she outlined. There is always a balance to be struck between protecting the public and not unduly imposing on the rights and freedoms of disabled residents, blue badge holders or the wider public who need to park in the city for essential reasons.

Marsha De Cordova: In my opinion, City of York Council is clearly breaching the law. It does not even seem to be complying with its responsibilities under the public sector equality duty. Is there scope for the Government to intervene to instruct or encourage the council to reverse the ban?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful for that question, which goes back to my point that ultimately central Government have to recognise, if we believe in devolution, that local

councils must have the aegis and the space to make decisions. However, councils must make those decisions in accordance with the law, must have regard to regulation, and must think carefully about the impact and implications of their decisions in the way the hon. Member for York Central outlined. The fact that the subject had to be raised in this place tonight is indicative of the level of concern that has been expressed on both sides of the House about the challenges facing the city of York.

I have to respect the devolution settlement. I have to recognise that, ultimately, it is right that decisions are made locally. Local government does fantastic things across the country on a daily basis, and we should congratulate it and thank it for doing so. Nevertheless, I hope that the city of York is listening tonight, that it has heard the concerns and comments that have been articulated, and that it will consider very carefully how to approach the matter in future.

Question put and agreed to.

7.53 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 25 April 2023

[JAMES GRAY *in the Chair*]

Hunger: East Africa and the Horn of Africa

[Relevant document: Second Report of the International Development Committee, Food insecurity, HC 504, and the Government response, HC 767.]

9.30 am

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered hunger in the East and Horn of Africa.

It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir James.

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. I am not Sir James—I am Mr Gray. Unless the hon. Gentleman knows something I don't, "Mr" is fine.

Patrick Grady: Well, that must be rectified in the near future, Mr Gray. *[Laughter.]* It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, especially given your family's heritage in Glasgow North. I am grateful to all the Members who have come today and to all those who sponsored the bid at the Backbench Business Committee—not all of them are able to be present, but I am grateful for the cross-party support for the debate.

The Backbench Business Committee has granted 90 minutes for this debate. Hunger and malnutrition kill people in the east and horn of Africa at the rate of one person every 36 seconds. In the time we have for today's debate, 150 people in the region will lose their lives because their basic right to food has been denied them for entirely preventable reasons. One of the most important things we can do today is make sure that this scandal no longer goes unnoticed.

Christian Aid's research has found that only 23% of the UK public are aware of the hunger crisis in the horn of Africa, compared with 91% who say they are aware of the crisis in Ukraine. The presence of so many Members here today, the correspondence we have received from constituents and the discussions we have had with those who have come to see us at our surgeries or at the mass lobby in February sponsored by the right hon. Members for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) and for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), show that when members of the public do develop an awareness and understanding of the situation, they demand urgent action to deal with the acute crisis on the ground and long-term action to build resilience and prevent future crises.

Countries in the horn and east of Africa, including Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, South Sudan and Eritrea, are entering their sixth consecutive season of below-average rainfall. The worsening food security situation also extends to Djibouti and Uganda. The World Health Organisation estimates that around 46 million people in the region currently face what the integrated food security phase classification system describes as crisis levels or worse, meaning households have

"food consumption gaps that are reflected by high or above-usual acute malnutrition".

Within that number, many now face catastrophe or famine levels where there is

"an extreme lack of food and/or other basic needs... Starvation, death, destitution and extremely critical acute malnutrition are evident."

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for securing this debate. In February I visited Turkana county in Kenya with the Tearfund charity and I saw the devastating consequences of four years of no rain at all. To tackle the famine in 2017 the UK Government contributed £900 million. So far in the current crisis we have contributed £156 million. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need to do much more?

Patrick Grady: The right hon. Member is exactly right, and I think that key theme will emerge throughout the debate.

On Friday there was a virtual roundtable of aid and development agencies that work in the region, and those of us present heard directly from representatives of Tearfund, among other aid agencies, in Kenya, Somalia and South Sudan, who described the reality of the situation on the ground. We heard from Manenji, who works with Oxfam in South Sudan, about the dead livestock that robs families and communities of their sources of income. We heard from Alec, who works with World Vision in Somalia, about the children who are losing out on education because their families have been displaced. We heard from John, who works with Action contra la Faim in Kenya, about how diseases such as cholera spread because there is inadequate sanitation. And we heard from Catherine, who works with the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, also in Kenya, who explained that some rains are arriving, but in quantities that are causing floods and damaging crops even further. Those extremes of weather are further exacerbating the situation—that was perhaps the clearest message from all those who contributed.

The hunger crisis is a climate crisis, and weather patterns have changed beyond all recognition, exactly as the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) said, becoming more extreme and less predictable. All the evidence shows that that is a result of pollution and carbon emissions pumped into the atmosphere by decades of past and ongoing industrial and commercial human activity in parts of the world that are not experiencing such extremes, or at least not experiencing their devastating consequences—in other words, so-called developed, western countries. The people who are most affected by climate change are those who have done least to cause it. That is the basic principle of climate justice, which is a concept, like that of climate emergency, that the UK Government do not appear to be willing to accept, let alone embrace or act on.

Other important structural causes have led to the hunger crisis, but they are also the result of decisions and actions taken by people—often by Governments—so they can be changed by making different decisions and taking different actions. The crisis in Ukraine has led to food price inflation around the world. In the UK, we have experienced inflation rates of about 10%, which has caused great and undeniable hardship to many of our constituents and among the poorest and most

[Patrick Grady]

vulnerable in society. On Friday, the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund told us about the effects of the inflation rate in Ethiopia, which is 30% and which affects people who are already trying to get by on the most basic of incomes and subsistence lifestyles.

Difficulties in ensuring the physical supply of grain, even grain delivered in the form of food aid, have also had a significant impact on the hunger crisis, which is why it was encouraging to hear from British International Investment about its investment in Somaliland to improve capacity at the port of Berbera.

The conflicts across the region compound the food crisis and begin to lead to a spiral, becoming both a cause and an effect of hunger. That has been particularly evident in Ethiopia in recent months. Decades of oppression in Eritrea, as we heard from Eritrea Focus, mean that information on the food security situation in that country is almost non-existent, although we can extrapolate from what is happening elsewhere. In recent days, the escalation of violence in Sudan has become a huge concern to us all, and the withdrawal of many aid agencies will simply drive more people to starvation. We must hope that the attention now being paid to what is happening in Sudan leads to long-term resolutions with respect to conflict and to food and nutrition systems.

In all this, gender is a critical factor. ActionAid has spoken of the importance of supporting women-headed households and the role that women play as key leaders in their communities, but they are also at risk of violence and exploitation; indeed, Tearfund referred in particular to child marriage, early pregnancy and prostitution. However, all those challenges are entirely the result of decisions and actions taken by individuals or Governments. There is nothing inevitable about the food crisis, and the stories we have heard, as well as the ones we are likely to hear during the debate, will demonstrate that. The crisis was entirely preventable, and it is eminently resolvable. Future crises are equally avoidable.

The UK Government and the international community need to take urgent action to respond to the acute emergency and to build resilience against further emergencies. First, the UK Government must simply up their game. The risks and dangers that were warned about when the Department for International Development was abolished and the aid budget cut are becoming a reality. As the right hon. Member for East Ham said, in 2017 the UK Government were able to provide more than £800 million to east Africa, which helped to stave off many of the worst impacts of looming famine and saved thousands of lives. There have been warnings about this crisis since 2020, but in the last financial year the UK's contribution was just £156 million—a cut of 80% from what was made available last time round. That is completely disproportionate with respect to the overall cut in the aid budget.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I, too, visited Kenya earlier this year with Oxfam and the Coalition for Global Prosperity, and we could see the effects of famine. On the point about the finance and support for aid, does the hon. Member agree that it is about not just the amount of aid, but where it goes and how important it is that UK aid is channelled to local providers on the ground to provide emergency relief?

Local organisations will have a better idea and a clearer system when it comes to where the funds should go and who actually needs them, whereas a multinational or even national organisation will not necessarily send them to the people who need them.

Patrick Grady: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. That becomes even more important when the budget is squeezed. A local response and grassroots knowledge are absolutely critical in responding and building infrastructure. We heard that from the agencies, and I will reflect a little on that before the end of my contribution.

I think we will all welcome the announcement by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs of a high-level pledging conference in New York on 24 May and the role the UK Government will play as a co-host. If the Government want to be taken seriously, they must lead by example. We will need not just announcements, but disbursements of scaled-up aid that will encourage other countries to do the same. There are already questions about exactly when and how the UK will disburse the pledge of £1.5 billion to the Nutrition for Growth fund. I know that Lord Oates, in another place, is paying particular attention to that through his United Against Hunger and Malnutrition initiative.

As the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) said, how aid funds are spent makes a big difference to both immediate response and resilience building. We will all have heard from non-governmental organisations on the ground about the importance of locally led interventions and that grassroots, community-based organisations are almost always best placed to know exactly what support is needed to help people in their area.

Aid in the form of cash transfers and social security empowers and dignifies individuals, even in the most difficult circumstances. Ensuring that children can continue to go to school and receive a meal while they are at school is perhaps one of the best examples of both meeting immediate need and investing in the future. Refugees International highlighted a study by the United States Agency for International Development that demonstrates that

“a more proactive response to avert humanitarian crises could reduce the cost to international donors by 30%, whilst also protecting billions of dollars of income and assets for those most affected.”

I am delighted to see that the Chair of the International Development Committee, the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), is with us today. The Committee's report on food security is tagged to the debate on the Order Paper, and it recommends that the Government work to

“empower the Global Alliance for Food Security to develop international solutions to regional food security challenges.”

The report spoke particularly about the pivotal role of sustainable, smallholder farming and agriculture, undoubtedly based on exactly the kind of excellent evidence from organisations on the ground that have provided background briefing for today's debate.

Given what is happening in Sudan, it is understandable that the Minister for Development cannot be here in person. He has taken a strong interest in this issue, and he and other Ministers have spoken about how they

need and want to make the reduced aid budget as effective as possible. I think he feels the pain of many of us in Parliament and beyond who know and understand the importance of international development at the damage done to the aid budget, to the painstaking cross-party consensus built up around it and to the reputation the UK earned as a result. He might even look a little enviously at the vision outlined by the SNP for an independent Scotland, where 0.7% of GNI is a floor, not a ceiling, for aid spending. As Ministers say and we know, for now the reduced funds must be made to work smarter and harder.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is right to talk at length about the application of the resources that are available at the moment. Does he agree that the extraction of clean, drinkable water in much of Africa is part of the problem and that more could and should be done to assist NGOs and other groups? Their expertise in that aspect would do much to transform the horn and central Africa.

Patrick Grady: Yes, absolutely. I am wearing the Scotland-Malawi tartan tie today. In Malawi, a common phrase is “water is life”, and the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for water, sanitation and hygiene, the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), is with us today as well. Water is absolutely crucial in all this, and even more important than access to food in some ways—a human being can survive for many days without food, but for barely any time at all without clean, safe water. I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman.

That goes back to how we make the limited resources we have work effectively. That is particularly difficult to do when official development assistance funds are being spent by the Home Office. If the Home Secretary does not want people to come here on small boats from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan or Somalia, rather than spend taxpayers’ money on housing people in hotels or trying to deport them to Rwanda, we should spend it wisely and effectively on avoiding conflicts and ensuring that there is food security in the first place. People would then perhaps be less likely to flee their home countries. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]

There was wide cross-party support for this debate to be granted time by the Backbench Business Committee, and that is evident from the number of Members present and the interventions so far. Many of those hoping to contribute have had the privilege of visiting countries in the horn of Africa in recent months, and I look forward to hearing their testimonies. We all represent constituents who are passionate about achieving global justice and ending hunger—entirely preventable, totally unnecessary hunger—once and for all. Action is needed now, otherwise we will be back here again. The costs in terms of money and, more importantly, human lives will only be higher.

James Gray (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that we have 40 minutes and eight speakers. Taking roughly five minutes each would be a courtesy. I call Sir Gavin Williamson.

9.46 am

Sir Gavin Williamson (South Staffordshire) (Con): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North

(Patrick Grady) on securing this debate on an incredibly important issue. Sadly, in terms of how much it has been talked about, this is largely a silent tragedy from the west’s perspective, but it is a tragedy that we could all see coming. I will direct most of my comments towards the horn of Africa, Somaliland and Somalia. This time last year, it was already clear, after numerous years without the rainfall that was hoped for and expected, that the coming year would be critical. We did not see the quantity of rain required, and the consequences affected many people.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North rightly touched on the war in Ukraine, which has had an enormous and devastating impact on so many of these countries, and he talked about the impact on prices for people living in them. The statistics from Somaliland and Somalia show that, as of October 2022, the price of a kilogram of rice had more than doubled, from 75 cents to \$2. Similarly, the price of three litres of cooking oil rose from \$4.50 to \$9. That has an impact on every single person right across Somaliland, Somalia and all the other countries in east Africa.

The response is not just about what we can do to facilitate more grain coming from Ukraine into the horn of Africa; it is also about the direct help that we can totally control. That is about delivering aid and support into those countries today. I understand that the Department has difficult choices, and I think everyone here would totally endorse the support it is giving to Ukraine and would encourage the Government to continue that, but this cannot be an either/or decision. People need help and support in Somaliland, Somalia, Kenya and so many other areas.

Alexander Stafford: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it would be easier for the UK to send aid to Somaliland if it were an independent country, so that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office could work with the Somaliland Government to get aid directly to the people who need it?

Sir Gavin Williamson: We see real challenges with aid being channelled through Mogadishu, rather than going directly into Hargeisa. As has touched on that, there are amazing port facilities in Berbera that can be used as a base to deliver aid across east Africa and the horn of Africa. British Government recognition of Somaliland, and making sure that the aid goes directly to the people of Somaliland, rather than being used as a political tool by Somalia, would certainly be of great assistance to the millions of people in Somaliland and to those hundreds of thousands of people who are facing real hunger and real challenges. The hon. Member for Glasgow North was right that more needs to be done, with urgency and immediacy.

In 2011 and 2017, Britain rightly took the lead. We created the framework that enabled other countries and nations to rally behind us and support people in dire need. Although good work is ongoing, the scale and urgency need to be stepped up. We need to be there.

We are the penholder in Somalia and Somaliland. We are recognised across the world as a nation that can make a difference, as we did in the crises of 2011 and 2017. Now is the time to step up again, which means more resources, more leadership and taking the bull by the horns to really drive the issue forward.

[Sir Gavin Williamson]

For a relatively small increase in support, we can save hundreds of thousands of lives. I think all our constituents want Britain to be the country that leads and demonstrates our ability to make a difference and to save lives. I encourage the Minister to take that message and, most importantly, to take action to do that.

9.51 am

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Gray. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for securing this important debate. I refer Members to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am also chair of the all-party parliamentary group for water, sanitation and hygiene.

I lived in Kenya for four years, and I know that the connections between this country and east Africa go very deep. I hardly meet any group of people without finding someone with an east Africa connection.

British people care, enormously, which is shown by the huge, generous support for recent aid requests, the strength of feeling about suffering and the feeling that British people want to help. But the east Africa food crisis has gone relatively unreported, and is not being raised as much as it should be, and so I am grateful that we are holding this debate.

This is the worst humanitarian crisis in 40 years. More than 50 million people have been pushed to acute food insecurity, and a person dies every six seconds in Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya—it is hard to get our heads around these figures, and the desperation. This is a perfect storm of climate change, with five successive rainy season failures and a likely sixth one, right now; conflict; disease outbreaks; the cost of living crisis; a reduction in aid; and countries saddled with unpayable levels of debt. Undoubtedly, it is political decisions that have led to this crisis.

About 22.7 million people across Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia face high levels of food insecurity—desperate hunger—compared with 18.6 million last August. That is an increase of 4 million people in the past six months, which shows how severe the drought has been.

The crisis is chronically underfunded—the overall funding requirements stand at about \$5.1 billion for Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia—and that underfunding is unsustainable. Implementing partners are having to stop projects and suspend or reduce lifesaving programmes due to underfunding at this critical time.

As always, women and girls are affected the most—they are on the frontline. They suffer higher risks of malnutrition and violence, and there is increased child and forced marriage.

Verity is an aid worker from CAFOD, who reported from a recent visit to northern Kenya:

“Returning from Marsabit, the situation is desperate and deteriorating. I was shocked by the scale of livestock deaths, asset loss and clear desperation of communities. I was struck by the huge numbers of dead animals—mostly camels; the cattle are long gone. The landscape and roadsides are littered with carcasses, some are skeletons, some have fallen only hours before. The condition of any remaining animals is extremely poor...

There is no grazing—the assessments rate the availability of pasture in Marsabit as ‘extreme’—in many places it looks like the surface of the moon. Endless rock and dust—not a blade of

grass... In towns there is no land available so groups are scattered, there is little water and little assistance. The households we spoke to had driven away their last remaining camels into the bush as they knew they would die and they would not be able to move the bodies if they died near the homestead. People are dignified but desperate...you can sense fear. People are talking of death.”

Aid agencies have for months been calling for the UK to increase aid to the region by £70 million, but this has not happened. Where is our aid money going instead? It has been drastically cut, skewed towards trade and spent on propping up the failing Home Office. The International Development Committee's recent report, “Aid spending in the UK”, was very illuminating. For a start, the facts about aid spending were hard to find. The Committee found that it was not transparent and that recent answers from the Minister were “wilfully opaque”. The report said:

“The proportion of aid spent in the UK has drastically increased in recent years, while programmes supporting people in the world's poorest countries were cut”,

which goes to the heart of this matter. The report also said:

“In 2021, the most recent year for which data are available, the Government spent more than £1 billion of the aid budget on in-country refugee costs”

in the UK, including hotels.

It is a crazy situation. There are fantastic young people—from Ethiopia, for example—travelling here who did not want to leave their country, but the money is being spent on hotel costs, instead of on helping them to stay in Ethiopia and support their own country, which is where they want to be. Save the Children has estimated that the cost of spending in the UK could be as high as £4.5 billion in 2022-23, accounting for one third of the entire aid budget. It is just extraordinary. Water and sanitation programmes have been cut by 80%, which does not match what British people want their aid to be spent on. In the last financial year, the UK pledged only £156 million to the crisis, which is less than a fifth of the £861 million provided in 2017-18.

To conclude, I ask the Minister to urgently commit to release already-pledged funding, to invest in and support communities and primary healthcare, to cut the debt, to transform the UK's agriculture portfolio towards local, diverse food systems, to fund water and sanitation projects as an emergency response, and to introduce clear targets to increase funds reaching local organisations, rather than just through multilateral organisations. The climate emergency is very real. I hope that both the media and Ministers are listening to this debate today, and that urgent action will be taken to save lives.

9.57 am

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under you again, Mr Gray. I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, and I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for securing this important debate.

It is sometimes argued that the public can focus on only one crisis at a time. I do not share that cynicism, but with the horrors of a European war now beamed into our homes on a daily basis, and energy and food prices stretching the resources of many households, the temptation—even among the most conscientious of world citizens—is to turn one's eyes away from the

suffering of the wider world. Events, however, do not stop when we refuse to look at them. Among their other merits, debates such as this serve to push back against forces of apathy, and they help us to challenge criticisms of aid as being indulgent, misdirected and ineffective.

Sadly, crises of drought, famine and conflict are too prevalent across east Africa and the horn of Africa. I will focus my comments on Ethiopia, which has significant influence as one of the largest countries in the region, but also because it holds much of east Africa's water resource, including the dam at the source of the Blue Nile, which flows into Egypt. Ethiopia also holds a unique position among its peers, in part through never having been colonised.

Alongside parliamentary colleagues, including the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar), I recently had the privilege of witnessing the excellent work of UNICEF and Ethiopian state and volunteer health workers in the southern region of Borena as they worked to fight malnutrition and its accompanying complications. We had discussions with national and regional Government officials and politicians, and also with recipients of the aid and relief: mothers with their infants, and community elders. I will, if I may, make three points about comments we heard about aid directed towards the country. They spoke of three ways of directing aid, with the first and preferred one being bilateral direct aid. That in particular could be used for capacity building in the country.

The approach to healthcare is community based, partly owing to circumstance and challenging terrain but also because of distance and a lack of infrastructure. That can be contrasted with our model of healthcare delivery, and we could learn something from a focus on primary aid and primary healthcare as an investment rather than a cost in terms of spending. The approach taken also—again, partly through circumstance and necessity—assumes a degree of personal responsibility. Agency is encouraged in the education provided in basic things such as hygiene and nutrition. We met some people who use a simple piece of paper to measure the circumference of an infant's upper arm, which indicates the state of the child's nutrition, and empower mothers to act on that and seek aid when necessary.

The second aid model spoken of was multilateral direct aid, which is what Gavi seeks to use. That again allows aid to be directed by the nation to where it can build capacity and strengthen systems and public service infrastructure. The third model discussed was implementation aid. The importance of its palliative relief was acknowledged by those we spoke to, but they were clear that it fails in leaving any legacy after it has been delivered. We saw some of the powerful benefits of that aid, but they were clear that the principal benefits to the nation lie not just in palliative relief for five missed rainy seasons and the consequences of the drought and famine that have followed but specifically in building up the necessary robust health infrastructure alongside that.

I have emphasised the importance of Ethiopia's geopolitical relations with other members of the region. Ethiopia, as a leader in the region, and given its resources, is key to unlocking wider benefits in the region and bringing relief. These events call us to think bigger and drive us to be better. Bigger and better should also be our response to the questions asked of the UK and its international aid and relief efforts.

10.2 am

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your guidance, Mr Gray. I offer huge congratulations to the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) on securing the debate, which is so timely. This issue is not getting the coverage it needs, so I am grateful for him giving it this exposure.

In the past five years, global food insecurity has worsened due to covid-19, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, inflation, extreme weather and armed conflicts. Tragically, that list is not exhaustive. Global food insecurity has culminated in a growing global hunger crisis. In particular, people living in east Africa are experiencing ever more severe levels of hunger. According to the World Health Organisation, 48 million people face crisis levels of food insecurity, 6 million people face emergency levels and 130,000 people face catastrophic—the highest—levels.

The scale of the challenge is immense. It is important that we remember that famine is not a one-off event. Hunger shocks cumulate. Communities become less capable of coping with the shocks, and the likelihood of famine increases. Hunger causes malnourishment and excess deaths. It allows infectious diseases such as measles, cholera and covid-19 to flourish, especially among children. Pregnant and breastfeeding mothers are particularly vulnerable, with almost one million of them in the region experiencing severe malnourishment. In addition, 5.1 million girls and boys are suffering from acute malnutrition. Children affected by hunger grow up stunted or wasted. Hunger has lifelong developmental impacts.

We know that hunger disproportionately affects women and girls. The International Development Committee heard that

“girls are eating less and girls are eating last”.

The hunger crisis has caused an increase in gender-based violence, including domestic violence and sexual harassment. Negative coping strategies are causing girls to be subjected to forced and early marriage.

East Africa has been particularly hit as the horn of Africa is suffering its worst drought for 40 years after five failed rainy seasons. The region relies extensively on rain-fed crops, meaning that the drought has devastated agricultural production, and 9.5 million livestock animals have already died across Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia, taking futures away. Food prices have reached unsustainable levels in east Africa, and much of that has been driven by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Ukraine is a major grain producer and exporter, from which Somalia typically imports 90% of its grain. I welcome the Black sea deal, agreed last July, which allows exports from Ukraine to resume, but the uncertainty of grain shipments continues to contribute to the hunger crisis.

Conflict in east Africa threatens food insecurity further. We have all seen the violence that erupted in Sudan 11 days ago. I am really grateful for today's ceasefire, and I hope it leads to a lasting solution. Before the conflict began, 16 million people needed humanitarian aid, and now the violence is exacerbating shortages of medicine, food and water. The World Food Programme has been forced to pause its operations after three of its employees died in the conflict.

The hunger crisis did not occur out of the blue. Multiple organisations, including the United Nations, began to warn last year about the worrying humanitarian situation in the region. Frustratingly, there can be much

[Sarah Champion]

human suffering and many deaths before famine is declared. In 2011, 260,000 died in Somalia due to famine, but 130,000 had already died before the famine was officially declared.

The International Development Committee sounded the alarm in July last year in its report on food insecurity. Following our oral evidence session, we wrote to the FCDO to ask it to commit emergency funding to the region to meet the humanitarian challenge, to support the Disasters Emergency Committee's appeal to raise funds to combat the approaching famine in the horn of Africa, and to match a proportion of the donations made. Despite those warnings, it failed to act. To prevent a famine in east Africa in 2017, the UK gave £861 million of humanitarian aid to the region, with Somalia alone receiving £282 million. In this financial year, the UK has committed only £156 million for the whole of east Africa, and I do not know whether that commitment has been fulfilled or whether it is still a pledge.

NGOs have noted that east Africa has received neither the attention nor the funding it requires, but money alone is not enough. The UK can use its position as a global leader to encourage others to act. We should use our position on the UK-led G7 famine prevention and hunger crisis compact, the G7 Global Alliance for Food Security and the Global Agriculture and Food Security Programme to persuade other countries to come together to prevent famine through humanitarian aid. Will the Minister please give an indication of the UK's intention at the forthcoming pledging conference for the region?

10.7 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for raising these issues and setting the scene so very well. He is a man of passion and understanding, and it is a real joy to sit alongside him in this debate. He and I often support each other in these types of debates.

I remember quite well the first time that I saw advertisements in the 1980s that showed children in Africa literally starving. It does not seem that long ago. My heart ached as I looked at my boys—I thank God that we were able to provide for them. I am always aware that there are people in the world who have literally nothing.

I am sad to say that many children are still starving. I am now a grandfather, and I feel that familiar tug in my heart today. I support many charities that have food programmes and operations in numerous countries in the horn of Africa, and they are stretched to capacity. They tell me that they are finding it very difficult to cope. Following five consecutive seasons of below-average rainfall, the horn of Africa is facing its longest drought in four decades. That is compounded by years of conflict and instability, the impact of climate change, covid-19—my goodness!—and rising food prices due to the war in Ukraine. Millions in the horn of Africa face acute hunger, and Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia have been particularly affected.

In its most recent review of the horn of Africa, published on 3 November 2022, the United Nations reported that 36.4 million people, including almost 20 million children, were affected by the drought, and

that 21.7 million people, including 11 million children, needed food assistance. Those figures illustrate the magnitude of the issue. UNICEF estimated that some 5.7 million children in the region require treatment for acute malnutrition, with 1.8 million children experiencing life-threatening malnutrition.

Although famine has not been officially declared in the horn of Africa, with projections of a sixth consecutive below-average rainy season, the famine early warning systems network has estimated that the horn of Africa, especially Somalia, will face a famine in 2023—right now, as we sit in Westminster Hall, that is a reality. With this knowledge comes responsibility. I have absolute confidence that the Minister is aware of this House's responsibility to do the right thing and increase not simply food aid, but ascertain how best we can channel projects to help families to become sustainable.

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Like every other speaker, the hon. Gentleman is making a powerful case to make sure that properly targeted resources reach the places they are so desperately needed. Does he agree that the international response, in terms of both resources and resolving the conflicts behind this crisis, has been too slow and indecisive? It really does need a fresh start to ensure that the political conflicts that underlie all this are addressed urgently and effectively.

Jim Shannon: I certainly do agree, and I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that point. When the hon. Member for Glasgow North gave his introduction, he emphasised that very point, as others have as well. They are right: decisive action needs to be taken by the Minister and our Government. I am ever mindful that our Government and Ministers have been active, but we do require more incisiveness.

Some of my churches back home have been involved with a project where they were able to buy a pair of chickens, two pigs, two goats—small things, Mr Gray, but things that can really change a family's life—with the idea that a family can breed those animals and live sustainably by selling the offspring. In the Upper Waiting Hall yesterday, and probably today, there was an exhibition on Yemen—one of the examples shown is that very project, which enables a family to be sustainable. The churches in my constituency of Strangford do that very thing.

Mr Gregory Campbell: On that point, will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the many hundreds of church and faith groups that do the type of thing he has outlined? Some do it on a small, localised scale, while others, through Tearfund and other organisations, do so on a significant, regional basis. Does he agree that that tribute is well deserved and should be supported by Government?

James Gray (in the Chair): Jim Shannon, briefly.

Jim Shannon: I totally agree with that. I conclude by urging the Minister to take on board the opinions of long-term NGOs that have been working in communities for years and understand what works and what does not. Some 500 humanitarian organisations have swiftly responded to reports of the evolving drought. The issues are clear. They have provided humanitarian assistance in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia, reaching 56%, 36% and 85% of the target populations in those countries respectively.

We need to work in partnership with NGOs that have experience and passion for their people. I believe that we can and must do more. I urge the Minister to increase our engagement with those NGOs. They know the stories on the ground, and those must be built upon.

10.13 am

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) on securing this debate. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the friends of CAFOD, I appreciate immensely the opportunity to discuss this issue today. It is a topic that we must shout about, because we stand on the precipice of an unprecedented sixth consecutive failed rainy season.

The lethal combination of the global cost of living crisis, local conflict and climate change-induced drought has led to a humanitarian disaster. We have heard the figures mentioned a number of times, but standing in this Chamber today, we really cannot comprehend that one person is likely to die every 36 seconds in Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya because of acute food insecurity. The UN predicts that half a million children are at immediate risk of death because of catastrophic hunger.

This is a humanitarian crisis that could have been avoided. In 2011, when famine was last declared in Somalia, the UN said that the warning signs of famine must never again be ignored, but the reality is that those warning signs, which we were told would be acted on, are being ignored once again.

Last year, the UK gave just one fifth of the aid provided to east Africa during the previous hunger crisis in 2017-18. The action then helped to prevent the spread of famine and undoubtedly saved lives, yet last week we heard that the aid budget for east and central African countries is being cut by a further £25 million in 2023-24. There are already 3.3 million internally displaced people across Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia as a direct result of the current crisis. As it persists, more people will look to take that treacherous journey north and will risk falling into the hands of people smugglers. Water scarcity is linked to around 10% of the global rise in migration, and global migration from drought and famine is also set to rise, which means that it is not just the lives of those directly affected and who are making these perilous journeys that will become less secure, but our whole world.

That is why the decision to spend three times more international aid in Britain than across the entire continent of Africa is baffling. In practice, that translates to the propping up of our ailing asylum system. Close to 30% of the money spent under Britain's overseas aid budget goes on projects here in the UK. We are spending increasing amounts of money dealing with the consequences of global insecurity, rather than targeting those precious resources on the causes. The international aid budget has also been cut for the past three years, which is a short-sighted approach.

I want also to focus on what more can be done. Next month's horn of Africa conference, which is being co-convened by the UK, offers us a real opportunity to advocate practical, targeted measures to make a meaningful, long-term difference to the region. As other hon. Members have mentioned, the aid must be targeted at local, resilient food systems. Local aid organisations know the needs in their areas best, and empowering them directly

with international aid is a win not just in the short term but in the long term. We can also use the UK's £11.6 billion international climate fund to ensure sustainable, resilient food systems that are better equipped to support local people, as climate change is also being caused by the global north.

Countries in east Africa are saddled with unpayable debts. The G20 debt service suspension is still hampered by the predominance of private creditors that are able to hold out from suspending debt. The UK is well positioned to help: 90% of affected countries' bonds are governed by English law. There is more that we can do to enable these countries to focus their precious, scarce resources on relieving hunger rather than paying unpayable debt.

This crisis has not sprung out of the blue. It has been a long, slow-developing catastrophe, and the Government must make up time by sticking to their previous commitments and spending their aid—our aid—wisely. If once again the rains do not come, more people will die. It is that simple. In this cold, hard reality, the urgency of this cry must be heard.

James Gray (in the Chair): There are nine minutes and two speakers. I call Hilary Benn.

10.19 am

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I join others in congratulating the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) on his excellent opening contribution.

The number of people affected by this crisis is truly staggering, and there is no doubt that the world, the UK included, needs to do more, but this is also a glimpse of a hellish future if we do not do more, as a world, to tackle poverty, conflict and climate change. This is a vision of what is to come.

Clearly, the cut in the aid budget and the fact that so much of it is being spent on refugees here in the UK means that the UK is doing less to assist. All of us who feel passionate about the UK's international development efforts need to ask ourselves why, given the high point of 2005 with the Make Poverty History campaign, when our postbags and email inboxes were overflowing, so few people said anything when the aid budget was cut by the Government. I am the former International Development Secretary, and I got fewer than 10 emails.

If we are honest, we need to ask ourselves how we are going to remake the case—remake the argument—for countries to play their part in tackling the three great scourges of our time. Clearly, having a civil war is a really bad way to advance the interests of a country. One only has to look at Sudan today, South Sudan previously and the Sudanese civil war before that—three civil wars in the space of 35 years—to see that it leads to people fleeing, insecurity and poverty.

If that is not bad enough, human-made climate change is having the greatest impact of all and will wreak enormous damage on people's lives if we do not do something about it. The truth is that we know what needs to be done; we just need to get on with it faster than we have been managing so far. I pay tribute to President Biden. For many years we criticised the United States of America for not doing enough, and then suddenly he came along with the Inflation Reduction Act. The initial response from some people was to

[*Hilary Benn*]

complain and whinge and say it is not fair. I would tell them to not complain but emulate, because this is the future if we are going to tackle climate change.

My final point, which others have touched on, is that if we do not tackle climate change, the movement of people around the world will be on a scale that we have never before witnessed. Even during the Syria conflict, Lebanon's population increased by 25%. That is the equivalent of 16 million people coming to Britain. Just pause and dwell on that prospect. I met climate refugees many years ago on a visit, as it happens, to Kenya, where people had moved because it stopped raining in the village where they lived. The fundamental truth is that human beings will not stay where they were born and brought up either to die of thirst or to drown as sea levels rise. They are going to be on the move, and the scale of movement will be enormous.

No wall, fence or immigration policy will prevent that movement. It is in our self-interest, in the true sense of the word, to do everything we can as a nation to help people in other parts of the world to be able to grow up, raise a family, live a healthy life, and be educated, safe and secure, wherever they happen to be. That is the argument as to why the United Kingdom should be doing more.

10.23 am

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Gray. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for securing this hugely important debate. I declare that I took part in a cross-party visit to Kenya in January, and the details are in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

As we have heard from the powerful contributions this morning, the horn of Africa has experienced one of the longest and most severe droughts on record. Some 46 million people in the region urgently need food assistance, and more than 16.2 million people cannot access sufficient water. Those numbers are absolutely staggering. The persistent droughts and severe flooding are the result of climate change, and the cause of mass displacement and loss of life. The situation has been compounded by the cost of living crisis and the war in Ukraine, which caused prices for wheat, oil and fuel to skyrocket, rising by 300% in March 2022. Some 4.5 million people are now refugees as a result of the crisis, and 12.7 million are internally displaced. The drought has damaged people's ability to grow crops, raise livestock and buy food, and 9.5 million livestock have died across Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia alone. It is catastrophic.

In January of this year I joined a cross-party delegation that visited Marsabit, Kenya, where the crisis is rapidly increasing in severity. I would like to place on the record my thanks to CAFOD and everybody involved in that tremendous visit. Kenya declared a national disaster in September 2021 because of the drought, and UN figures estimate that the number of people affected by drought-driven hunger has increased from 1.4 million to 4.1 million in the last year. The fifth successive below-average rainy season has resulted in below-average crop production, poor livestock conditions and higher exposure to livestock diseases. I saw all of that when I went there. In turn, it has led to the loss of livelihoods and assets, and has increased food insecurity and malnutrition.

The drought has also had a devastating impact on children's learning. Thousands of pupils have had to drop out of school due to the impact of food insecurity and climate-induced displacement. I will never forget the sights I witnessed, nor the magnificent fortitude of the people I met in Marsabit: the mothers who were distraught about how the crisis was threatening the education and futures of their children; the camels dying on the side of the road due to the unprecedented drought; and the communities decimated, with their standard of living disappearing before their eyes because of the loss of livestock.

I also saw how investment in people—in this case, water wells supplied by CAFOD—can transform and help the pastoralists to survive the drought and ensure they remain a key part of the future of Kenya, where they make up a fifth of the country. If Kenya loses those people and livestock, it poses an existential threat to the social and economic fortunes of the country and, indeed, of Africa.

As Action Against Hunger said in its briefing for this debate, in reality, millions of people are facing hunger and malnutrition and are losing their livelihoods due to a lack of political will to act. That includes the political will of this Government. I close my contribution by asking the Minister why the £156 million of funding committed by the UK in 2022-23 was only 20% of the amount committed to the region in 2017. Given the severity of the crisis we see before our eyes, I press the Minister to urgently increase funding now, for all the reasons that have been spoken so eloquently about today. Crucially, the Minister must ensure that the funding reaches local-led initiatives that have local knowledge and understand the short and long-term needs of the community. That is absolutely vital.

Furthermore, will the Minister commit to reinstating the aid budget to 0.7% of GDP as soon as possible? In addition to that immediate support, I urge the Minister to consult representatives from across the region to discuss what is needed to prepare for the future crisis, as well as long-term resilience building programmes, including climate adaptation, which is crucial for everybody.

Regarding the climate emergency, I am deeply concerned that the UK Government are yet to show the ambition required to avoid worsening catastrophic climate impacts. There needs to be an immediate change in direction to deliver on reaching net zero carbon emissions by 2050. The UK must deliver additional funding for loss and damages caused by our contribution to the climate emergency.

The crisis across east Africa is now of immense proportions. As Action Against Hunger has said, famine is not a singular event but the result of a series of shocks that accumulate over time. With each shock, communities become less able to cope and another famine becomes more likely to occur. The UK need to provide immediate support as part of the urgent humanitarian response, as well as long-term support to prevent future crises and climate-driven displacement and that builds resilience in communities. I urge the Government to act with urgency.

10.28 am

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I draw Member's attention to my entry in the Register

of Members' Interests, which will be updated shortly to reflect my recent attendance on a cross-party delegation to Ethiopia. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) on securing this vital debate. Alongside the hon. Members for Putney (Fleur Anderson), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), he set out that this is a crisis of unprecedented proportions.

Communities in the east and the horn of Africa are currently facing the worst climate-induced drought in 40 years. It is an evolving crisis that is shaping up to be worse than the drought that hit the region in 2010-11. I echo the comments made by the Opposition that the UK Government must take immediate action to increase the amount that they are providing in aid to the area.

As the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) has already stated, the region of east Africa and the horn of Africa has experienced the deadly combination of climate change, conflict and a global cost of living crisis. It is estimated by the international organisation Action Against Hunger that every 36 seconds one person in east Africa dies as a result of acute food insecurity. Five consecutive years of below-average rain means that the horn of Africa has experienced its longest and most severe drought in recent history.

Despite contributing just 0.6% of global greenhouse gas emissions, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia are experiencing the brunt of a climate crisis that is worsening each year. As the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson) said, the situation is exacerbated by global factors, such as the ongoing war in Ukraine, as Somalia is heavily reliant on Ukrainian grain imports, which make up 90% of its supply.

Tragically, all too often we have witnessed the devastating impact of drought in the region. In 2010 and 2011, a drought claimed the lives of 260,000 people, half of whom were under the age of five. Sadly, we now face a crisis that is expected to be significantly worse, yet the support available is much less than in previous years. It is imperative that we take action now to provide critical assistance and support to those affected by the crisis, to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe of even greater magnitude.

As various Members have said, the continual cuts to humanitarian funding by the Conservative Government have left the UK ill-prepared to provide much-needed support to the region. In 2017, it faced the potential risk of famine. At that point, the UK provided £861 million in humanitarian aid, which undoubtedly saved thousands of lives; yet in 2022, the UK committed just £156 million to the region, which was 80% less than five years earlier. Despite our being aware of the potential for famine in the region since 2020, there has been no increased financial response from the UK.

I agree with the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) that countries must consider their international aid response. The UK must do better when responding to such crises. The Conservative Government must immediately return to spending 0.7% of GNI on aid. Crucially, this funding should not come from shifting money around but by increasing the overall pot of funding available.

Although providing funding to address the immediate crisis is crucial, we must also look to the future and consider how to establish longer-term initiatives. The

UK Government should follow the lead of the EU, New Zealand and the Scottish Government by establishing a loss and damage fund for those impacted by climate change. Somalia is the second most vulnerable country to the impact of climate change and would benefit from such a fund. By taking proactive measures, we can address the root cause of the crisis and help to build resilience to changing climate.

In its latest report, Plan International found that the causes and consequences of food insecurity are closely entwined with gender; particularly the gendered access to food, gender-based violence and the impact on education, as well as the impact on sexual and reproductive health and rights. The reality is that when food is scarce, girls and women bear the brunt—by eating less, eating last and eating the least nutritious foods. In this hunger crisis, women's nutritional needs take a back seat to those of boys and men, particularly within households, putting women and girls at a higher risk of malnutrition.

The hunger crisis extends further than access to proper nutrition; it also has a detrimental effect on the levels of violence against women and girls. Plan International reports that incidences of rape, domestic violence, female genital mutilation and forced marriages rise in countries affected by a hunger crisis. It outlined that women are more vulnerable at water collection points and during the long journey there, with water shortages forcing them to travel—sometimes through the night—to water stations, putting them at greater risk of violence. The combination of extreme hunger and entrenched power imbalances creates the conditions for sexual exploitation of those simply trying to obtain food.

Additionally, the problem of early forced marriage has only been exacerbated by the hunger crisis. Girls are more likely to be married off to reduce the burden on families, or to allow their family to receive a dowry payment as a source of income. Early marriage can have a knock-on effect on girls' education, whether it is withdrawn early or simply not seen as a priority. That issue was raised by the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), who chairs the International Development Committee.

Just last month, I had the privilege of joining a cross-party delegation of MPs who travelled to Ethiopia with UNICEF. As the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) has said, we were there to learn more about how UNICEF is working to reach and treat malnourished children. A worldwide organisation, UNICEF provides roughly 80% of the world's ready-to-use therapeutic food, which is a highly nutritious and effective peanut paste that is used to treat severe acute malnutrition.

The image of a mother carrying her severely malnourished child and feeding peanut paste to the child will never leave my brain. It is seared into my memory, because as soon as the child got the pack of peanut paste, they absolutely devoured it and could not get enough of it. That image will never leave me, and since returning home I have been making a conscious effort to change my eating habits to ensure that I try not to waste so much food.

The UNICEF staff out there were fantastic, especially Stanley, the UNICEF chief of nutrition in Ethiopia. He explained to us the impact of malnutrition on families, children and young mothers. In a camp, we spoke to one family. The mother had nine children, and her husband had gone back to his home area to try to build

[*Ms Anum Qaisar*]

their lives up again. UNICEF staff gave nutrition packs to the family, but at the back of my mind was a thought that astounded me: the mum had brought forward one malnourished child who had been given a nutrition pack, but when she returned to her home area she would surely be sharing the packs among all the other children. In reality, there was not so much help for the child, who would get better only very slowly.

The UK has historically been a leader on international aid budgets. Although the Tory Government have scaled back their support, they can still help. Will the Minister commit himself to providing £70 million, as UNICEF has asked, for the child nutrition fund over the next 12 months? That funding would help to reach 1 million children through the early prevention, detection and treatment of severe acute malnutrition.

While I was in Ethiopia, I also visited the Dubluk internally displaced persons camp in the Borena zone. The site accommodates people who have been displaced internally by the drought. It can host 50,000 people. When we visited, there were about 15,000 there. However, across the Borena zone, as is the case in east Africa and the horn of Africa, the food security situation is worsening. Ethiopia is severely impacted by drought, and a lack of animal feed has meant that much of the livestock in the country has died. In turn, that has made food more expensive.

We had the opportunity to speak to some village elders. During our conversations, I asked what they wanted. They said that they are farmers, and that they wish to have the means to be self-sufficient and self-reliant. Depletion of livelihood income due to the prolonged drought has led to a drastic deterioration of the nutritional status of the vulnerable population, so will the Minister explain whether there are specific routes for aid funding for people who wish to rebuild their lives?

The overwhelming support from Members across the House on this issue demonstrates the gravity of the situation in east Africa and the horn of Africa, but words alone are not enough. We must back our words with action.

10.38 am

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray, and I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for securing the debate. All of us here will recognise that the debate is sorely overdue. In parts of east Africa, people are desperate following almost three years of severe drought: 22 million people are in acute food insecurity, 16 million have inadequate access to water and almost 10 million livestock animals have died. Those numbers are simply staggering. Some 5.1 million children are acutely malnourished. Their health has been severely weakened and they are vulnerable to disease. Many, should they survive, will experience lifelong impacts owing to stunting. The UN has estimated that, in Somalia alone, 43,000 people died because of hunger last year. More than half were children under the age of five.

We are now in the middle of the sixth rainy season since the drought began, and the limited rainfall so far is not enough. Recovery will take many years, so we

need to look at extended support and partnerships to build resilience for when the rains inevitably fail in future. We must remember that the impact of food insecurity is not limited to hunger.

Zala had to drop out of school. Her parents could not afford to continue feeding her and her younger siblings. Things got worse and it seemed obvious that Zala would have to marry an adult man simply to survive. That would have put her at risk of early and unwanted pregnancies and all the dangers of giving birth as a child. It would have trapped her in a cycle of powerlessness and poverty.

Thankfully, a small intervention provided Zala with the means to put food on the table. She now has a future to look forward to, but other girls in the same village were not so lucky—girls whose much older husbands treat them as lifelong, unpaid servants; girls who are not allowed to leave the house; girls with bruises all over their bodies; girls who simply have no hope left. That is what food insecurity can mean.

I want to approach today's debate country by country, because each country is different and needs targeted and sustainable solutions. I want to start with Sudan because the humanitarian consequences of the conflict are simply dire. Within Sudan, as we know, hospitals are being attacked. Supplies are being looted, including from humanitarian stocks, and people are running out of the basics. Even before the conflict began, Sudan had a hunger crisis that was linked to flooding and the political deadlock caused by the 2021 coup. Can the Minister say what plans are being made to respond to the forced displacement that we will see across the borders? That will obviously include South Sudan, where the humanitarian situation is already truly appalling.

In reality, conflict in South Sudan has never stopped, with frequent intercommunal and political violence and the use of atrocities, including mass rape as a weapon of war. Aid workers are killed with awful frequency. We see that in Sudan, too. I pay tribute to the brave aid workers killed in the past week and those who are still struggling to get aid to the most needy in the most desperate situations.

In South Sudan, repeated serious flooding destroys roads and clogs rivers, making humanitarian access really difficult. The floodwaters are mostly generated not by local rainfall but by rains hundreds of miles upstream. In many areas, crops can be destroyed by drought and by flooding—too much water and too little—almost side by side. Conflict, corruption, flooding and drought combined mean that an estimated 1.4 million children under the age of five are expected to suffer from acute malnutrition this year.

This is a bitter irony. From the conversations that I have had, the agricultural potential of South Sudan is massive. If there was sustained peace, and investment in irrigation and water management systems to safely distribute and conserve the Nile waters, food security could significantly increase. There would be no need for the people to be dependent on food aid or vulnerable to such recurring crises. Can the Minister tell us what approach he is taking to enable greater humanitarian access and sustained improvements in food security in South Sudan?

In Ethiopia, as we know, people face severe challenges in different areas of the country. In Tigray, although humanitarian access has significantly improved, it remains

limited in more outlying areas. In parts of Oromia, hunger continues to be exacerbated by terrible conflict. Across the eastern regional states, the situation is similar to that in Somalia and north-eastern Kenya, with a brutal drought destroying livelihoods on a vast scale.

As we have heard, the hunger crisis is most intense in Somalia, where the Government's efforts to combat al-Shabaab risk being totally undermined, if they cannot secure benefits for the people in recaptured areas. Even Kenya, a middle-income country, is struggling. Last month, I heard from a Kenyan NGO leader, who set out a truly dire picture. Even where women and girls are able to remain in their communities, they are having to walk all day for clean water, from 5 am to 6 pm.

As colleagues have already said, we need to recognise that this crisis is being exacerbated by climate heating. Last year, the Met Office published a climate risk report for the east African region, which says that in rural lowland areas, temperatures

"are already reaching the upper limits of human habitability".

The paradox is that the average rainfall could increase over coming decades. There is more than enough water for the societies of east Africa to develop, but there will be more frequent heavy rainfall events, and more variability in rainfall from one year to the next. Without drastic improvements in water management, that will simply mean more deadly flooding, more soil erosion, more contamination of drinking water, and more deadly droughts.

I know the Government are playing a supporting role around access to climate finance for adaptation, and the new loss and damage mechanism. I hope the Minister will say more about how we can make those systems really work for the worst affected east African states because, frankly, the bureaucracy involved is insurmountable for many. I firmly believe that we need to think about resilience and development, not just about humanitarian aid, but this current crisis is far from over, and the continued support for nutrition, health and livelihoods is essential.

We now have confirmation of UK support for a pledging conference, which is sorely needed. Funding was forthcoming last year, primarily from the US, as we have heard, but stakeholders desperately need commitments for the next period. We know that, thanks to uncontrolled Home Office spending, the ODA budget for east and central Africa is set to fall yet again. Our pledge is now set to be £390 million for the entire, massive region. During 2017, the Government provided £861 million, which was just to the countries of Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya and South Sudan.

I know that the Government will advocate strongly for others to step up, but frankly we need to step up too. We need to support real solutions in partnership, working with the countries and communities most affected. We need to stop writing a blank cheque out of the ODA budget to prop up our failing asylum system. Otherwise, we will fail to play our part and fail to support the peoples of east Africa, just when they need our solidarity the most.

10.49 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): It is a pleasure to serve under your guidance this morning. Mr Gray. I am pleased to respond on behalf of the

Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who has a previous ministerial engagement.

I sincerely thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for securing this important debate. I also thank right hon. and hon. Members from both sides of the House, who spoke most eloquently and thoughtfully, including my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson), the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar), the hon. Members for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), and the hon. Members for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar), and for West Ham (Ms Brown).

I should start by mentioning the very grave situation in Sudan. Colleagues will have listened to the statement in the Chamber yesterday by the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield. It is clear to everyone that that appalling violence is bringing great suffering. We welcome the fragile ceasefire, and of course our thoughts are with those involved in the evacuation effort that was announced this morning. We wish them Godspeed. As has been laid out eloquently this morning, the conflict has placed the entire country in jeopardy. Nearly 6 million people in Sudan need life-saving aid, and the ongoing violence and outrageous attacks on relief workers have brought humanitarian operations to a standstill. Regretfully, many humanitarian agencies have therefore had to evacuate their personnel.

Clearly, information is limited. At least 427 people have been killed and 3,700 have been injured. Prices of essential items are very sharply increasing, and 11 health facilities are under attack. The situation is dire and we are entirely focused on it. Humanitarian access will clearly depend on the fragile peace holding, and the full resolve and determination of the Department is focused on that. My right hon. Friend the Minister will keep colleagues updated as we move through the difficult days ahead.

I turn to the subject of this debate. The situation in east Africa represents the largest humanitarian crisis in the world right now, and it is magnified by climate change, as eloquently laid out by the hon. Member for Glasgow North and the right hon. Member for Leeds Central. It is also driven by conflict in the African continent and aggravated by Russia's illegal war in Ukraine. The scale of the crisis is truly shocking: more than 72 million people will require humanitarian assistance in 2023. As we have heard, in the past 24 months, food insecurity and malnutrition rates have soared. Millions are now in crisis and hundreds of thousands of people, a great many of them children, are at imminent risk of famine.

Of course, climate change and conflict have converged in east Africa with deadly consequences. The war in Tigray, the threat of al-Shabaab in Somalia and the deadly ongoing violence in South Sudan and Sudan have placed millions in grave danger. Armed groups continue to act with impunity, and women and girls are bearing the brunt, as they often do.

[*Leo Docherty*]

After the fifth consecutive failed rains, Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya are experiencing the worst drought for 40 years, and the March to May rains are unlikely to provide the respite needed. That will further deepen the crisis. Millions have been displaced, livelihoods have been destroyed, and the resilience of communities has been eroded. At the same time, South Sudan has faced the worst flooding in its history, which has displaced vulnerable communities and left millions in need of assistance. As climate events become more severe and frequent, the most vulnerable communities are the hardest hit.

I turn to the UK's action. The UK Government of course recognise the scale of the crisis, and we applaud the tireless efforts of the brave and dedicated humanitarian staff working in extremely challenging and hazardous conditions. We are committed to alleviating suffering, and we are playing a leading role in the international humanitarian response. We met our commitment last financial year to providing at least £156 million of humanitarian aid across east Africa. That aid has provided millions of people with life-saving assistance, including access to clean water and treatment for severely malnourished children, and emergency medical care, including specialist care for women who have experienced gender-based violence.

UK aid is providing hope across the region and is making a difference. As my right hon. Friend the Minister set out in a written statement on 30 March, we will spend £390 million of bilateral official development assistance in east and central Africa this financial year. We are committed, long-term partners in east Africa, and have invested more than £1 billion in humanitarian aid alone since 2019. Despite the temporary reduction in Government ODA spending, the UK is the third highest spender of ODA in the G7 as a percentage of gross national income. We spent more than £11 billion in aid in 2021. In recognition of the significant unanticipated costs incurred in supporting people from Ukraine and Afghanistan, the Government are spending an additional £1 billion in 2022-23, and £1.5 billion this year to help meet the costs of hosting refugees.

Sarah Champion: My cogs are whirring pretty slowly this morning. The Minister said that £300 million was going to east Africa. Is that for humanitarian aid? I know that British International Investment is investing capital money in Kenya, so I hope that he is talking about humanitarian aid, not the general aid going to the region.

Leo Docherty: The hon. Lady asks a very good question. The breakdown of our commitment to east Africa will be announced by my right hon. Friend the Minister with responsibility for development and Africa. As she would expect, I will not pre-empt his announcement, but he will make that clear at the pledging conference on 24 May, which will be of great interest to her. We will also use that event to focus on how we break the cycle of crises affecting the region.

East Africa contains some of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world, as has been eloquently described this morning, but they receive a tiny proportion of global climate finance, which could deliver the adaptation

they need to build long-term resilience. We want to change that, so that countries can withstand the increasing challenges that climate change brings. Alongside that, we will meet our global pledge to commit up to £11.6 billion of UK climate finance between 2021 and 2026. The UK is also working with the UN and its members to ensure that response operations are as effective and efficient as possible.

The severity of the crisis is very clear. It has been eloquently described this morning, and the situation is at risk of getting worse. The Government understand that, and we are focused on it in the Department. Our humanitarian support to east Africa is providing millions of people with essential services, and we will continue to work with partners to save lives and build resilience for the future. While the current context is bleak, the UK is committed to addressing the long-term drivers of vulnerability and suffering, so that communities across east Africa can realise their potential and reap the benefits of stability and development.

10.56 am

Patrick Grady: I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate. It has been incredibly encouraging to hear cross-party consensus on the action that needs to be taken. I will not list everyone who spoke, because the Minister just did that, but I am extremely grateful for both the interventions and the speeches that have been made.

I particularly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar) on her appointment as the SNP's international development spokesperson, a role that I held from 2015 to 2017. As she says, it never really leaves you, which is one of the reasons why we are here today.

A few key themes emerge from the debate, which I hope the Minister will continue to reflect on. The first is the action that is needed at the pledging conference, which has to include an upscaling of the aid that has been committed. That means that there has to be a move away from spending ODA money in the United Kingdom. Of course refugees and asylum seekers who arrive here need to be supported, but that should not be at the expense of our response to the poorest and most vulnerable people elsewhere in the world. The importance of focusing on women and girls, who are otherwise left eating less, eating last and eating the least nutritious food, came through very clearly as well.

The whole crisis in east Africa was completely avoidable and totally preventable. There is a need for resilience for the future, and this debate has drawn attention to the current situation. We must continue to keep this issue at the front of the Government and wider public's mind. We hear from constituents about it, and the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) is absolutely right to say that we have to rebuild the consensus that existed in 2005.

I note that the Chamber is filling up for the next debate, which is to be led by the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) and is on universal infant free school meals. Imagine if free school meals were truly universal—for every single child on this planet, not just in this country. If it is good enough for children in this country, it should be good enough for children in every single country in the world. That really would bring

about an end to food insecurity, and it would provide a more stable basis for future development. I wish Members taking part in that debate all the best, and I am grateful to everyone who has taken part in this one.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered hunger in the East and Horn of Africa.

Universal Infant Free School Meals

11 am

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered universal infant free school meals.

It is good to see you in the headteacher's chair, Mr Gray. In my time in the House, I have seen many innovative ways of speaking in a debate, but the mover of one debate speaking on the following one, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) has just done, is a new one, even on me.

There are lots of debates around on universal infant free school meals, and lots of things that could be meant by that phrase. A number of the briefings I have been sent ahead of today's debate back up that view. There is the campaign being pushed by Jamie Oliver and others on extending the free school meal entitlement to all children. There is the ongoing debate on school holiday food for those eligible for free school meals during term time. On that issue, I want to recognise how responsive and welcome Ministers have been, getting help to my constituents where it is most needed. I place on the record my thanks to them for that.

Today's debate, however, is not about either of those areas, important though they are. I want to focus on the pressure being felt by headteachers across my constituency, and, I am sure, elsewhere, when it comes to meeting the cost of what is supposed to be a universal entitlement to free school meals for infant-aged children. Put simply, there is a gap between the funding received and the cost of putting good-quality food on the school table. There is an inevitable impact on school budgets, which make up the shortfall. Heads began to raise that issue with me late last year. We will come on to some figures for Winchester in a moment.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this issue this forward. He is absolutely right. There is pressure on headmasters. There is pressure coming from parents, who are having difficulty providing meals for their children at school, and school uniforms. On support for parents, including through the universal provision of school meals, does he agree that the least we could do for all those working parents who are struggling to make ends meet is to help them, and help headmasters as well?

Steve Brine: Yes, headmasters and headmistresses are in a very difficult position; I will quote some of them shortly.

Representatives of UK wholesalers have contacted me to express concern about the fact that because of food inflation, rising energy bills and increased labour costs, they are fulfilling their public sector food contracts, but at a loss. I think there was broad welcome for the Government's recent decision to increase the funding for universal infant free school meals by 7p per pupil, but that rise remains well behind the rise in food inflation, which is running at 20% for wholesalers, according to the Federation of Wholesale Distributors.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for supporting my recent campaign to increase funding for school breakfast clubs for infants. Will he continue to support that campaign? Does he agree that school

[Alan Mak]

breakfast clubs effectively complement the provision of school lunches, which he so confidently and eloquently campaigns for?

Steve Brine: Yes. School food is important. My good friend, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), chair of the all-party parliamentary group on school food, is here. When I was the public health Minister, I worked with Kellogg's on school breakfast clubs and the breakfast club awards that it runs so successfully in our country. I am sorry that the campaign of my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Alan Mak) did not bear fruit in this Budget, but I know he will not give up, and I shall work alongside him. As Chair of the Select Committee on Health and Social Care and a constituency MP, I am interested in this issue, as well as in wider prevention work. Healthy, well-fed children learn well.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Steve Brine: As I mentioned the hon. Lady, I had best give way to her.

Mrs Hodgson: As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, I chair the APPG on school food. He makes the point that the money given for infant free school meals has not kept pace with inflation. Public sector caterers are really struggling to continue to provide the high-quality meals that we all want provided. If funding had risen with inflation since 2014, the amount per meal would stand at £2.97; it is currently only £2.41, as the hon. Gentleman knows. By my maths, that is a 19% shortfall—£150 per year, per child. The Government are yet again asking schools to do more with less. Does he agree that school meal funding needs to be made fit for the future?

Steve Brine: That is the point of today's debate. I will supplement the figures that the hon. Lady gave in one moment. We have slightly digressed, and now we are back on subject. I am told that the impact of food inflation has already resulted in some pupils being forced to accept smaller lunches with potentially lower nutritional value, and in some cases schools have opted to offer only packed lunches because of the cost of the energy needed to produce lunches. Some wholesalers have reported that they are reducing portion sizes; thinner sliced ham in baguettes and reduced meat content in sausages are two examples. That should worry all of us.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for making such significant points on this issue. As somebody who used to receive free school meals, and coming from a constituency where a high number of children receive free school meals, I really understand the importance of a good-quality meal. Does he agree that the Government must really look at all avenues to try to avert this serious shortfall in covering the price of school meals?

Steve Brine: Yes, and I will come on to my asks. One that I was not going to cover, but will, is the discrepancy between the amount we pay for the universal infant entitlement and the amount we pay for those who are entitled to free school meals through circumstances.

There is a curious difference. Why does the one meal rate one amount, and the other a different amount? I know that the chair of the APPG, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West, certainly recognises that.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies recently published its report on the costings of free school meals. I am not sure if the Minister saw its work, but it found that if the price per meal had risen with inflation since 2014, it would be £2.87 today. That is a few pence lower than the figure mentioned by the chair of the APPG, but it is clearly still a big jump from the current £2.41.

The Local Authority Caterers Association has in its membership over 300 local authorities, as well as contract caterers, catering managers, and kitchen and school staff, which means that some 80% of school food is provided by its members. It told me that without change, the future of the sector is, in its word, "bleak". In March, it published its "If not now, when?" mission, which calls on the Government to reform school meal funding, address inflationary pressures, and commit to ongoing reviews that make adjustment for inflation. I echo that as my first ask this morning, and this is why: one school in my constituency—I will not name any of them, to respect their wishes—receives £2.41 per child, yet as of October last year, it pays £2.80 per child, per school meal, to the main provider in Hampshire. It told me that it had to subsidise meals with around £4,700 from the school budget between November 2022 and the end of the financial year, which has just passed.

Another small rural school in my constituency reported a total shortfall this financial year of £3,150. These do not sound like big figures, but the metric goes up: the bigger the school, the bigger the numbers. When there are very tight budgets—which, of course, they have—they can be tipped into a deficit situation.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this really important debate. Many of the points he makes are exactly the points that primary schools in my constituency of Twickenham raise with me regularly. Although we and they welcome the Mayor of London's announcement that he will roll out free school meals to all primary children next year for a year only, there are grave concerns that that will not be funded properly. Some primary schools told me that they could find themselves £30,000 to £40,000 out of pocket if the meals are not funded properly, and the capital cost of expanding kitchens and dining areas is not met. Does he agree that although the policy change is welcome, it needs to be funded properly?

Steve Brine: I do, and if I were a London MP, I would be very concerned about that. I can understand that the policy is electorally attractive on a leaflet, but unless it is funded, we could end up with the situation that I am describing, times some. As I said, the debate is not about widening entitlement to free school meals to all primary children, but the hon. Lady sets out a great danger.

Mrs Hodgson: On a point of clarification, I, too was worried about the funding and had read the same information as the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), so I asked to meet the Mayor of London's team, who will be taking the programme forward. They

assured me that although a sum of money has been assigned—a proposed £2.65 a meal—the funding will be found and will be sustainable. They are aware of the concerns, but—

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be brief.

Steve Brine: We can go down this rabbit hole. The funding can be found up front, as it was for the free bus pass entitlement, but it can then tail away. It is a matter of whether it is sustained, as the hon. Member mentioned; that is the key point.

I have two other examples. A Winchester city centre school contacted me predicting a shortfall of about £4,000 in the financial year that we have just entered. A larger infant school told me of an £11,000 deficit on school meals last year. The head told me:

“This is having a significant impact on an already very pressured budget; we have an in-year deficit of around £25,000 this year and nearly half of that is caused by the infant school meals offer.”

That is not easy listening, but these are real figures from real schools and real headteachers in my patch.

To conclude the examples, one headteacher put it to me:

“My point is that Universal Free School Meals are not free. Parents believe they are. Therefore, quite rightly they opt for their children to have school meals. I know of schools who are now writing to their parents explaining the situation and asking them for a donation to cover the cost of their child’s meal. Personally, I do not want to be forced down this route. If the meals are advertised as free, then they should be free (there’s a clue in the name!).”

She concludes:

“When this Government policy came in, it was not meant to have a financial impact on schools and, indeed, it means that schools like ours will be forced to set a deficit budget and hence make staffing cuts.”

There is perhaps hope in the story. It is only right to report that, during my research for the debate, I heard from one school in my area—I do not doubt that there could be others—that is taking matters into its own hands and moving away from Hampshire County Council Catering Services, or H3CS, which is the main provider of food to Hampshire’s schools.

One school told me that it had made the switch to another provider where meals are

“better quality, with wider choice, and at a reasonable price for families.”

It tells me that the food is seasonal and locally and sustainably sourced, with zero single-use plastic. As MPs, we all know that when we go into our schools, the No. 1 issue that children want to talk to us about is plastics, the environment and sustainability, so it ticks lots of boxes. Yet 82% of Hampshire’s schools—mostly primary schools—use H3CS, despite support being available to move providers if that is what they want.

For some schoolchildren, the school meal will be their only hot meal that day. It might be their only meal that day. We know that the provision of good-quality food is key to pupils’ wellbeing and ensuring that they can fully engage in teaching and learning. We also know that school budgets are under pressure, but I hope that the Minister recognises from the examples I have given that there is an issue.

We must ensure that the provision of a good-quality meal does not need to be subsidised by funds intended to support core education. It is therefore essential that the rate is adjusted to reflect rising costs. Will the Minister update the House on that? Will he also update me on any moves afoot to reform school meal funding and simplify the equitable flow of money from Government to school kitchen? Lastly, what can the Government do to promote a more diverse, competitive marketplace in school food? What support does the Department provide to local authorities, and therefore headteachers, to make it easy for schools to switch when they deem a change is to the advantage of their setting?

I am grateful to those who contacted me ahead of the debate, especially the headteachers in Winchester and Chandler’s Ford. This aspect of school food is not much discussed in the House—I have not taken part in a debate on the issue, and I have been here for almost 13 years—so I am pleased to raise some of the issues brought to me through my constituency casework. I thank colleagues for their interventions and look forward to hearing from my good friend the excellent Schools Minister.

11.14 am

The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your beady eye, Mr Gray. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) on securing this important but short debate on school food. We can all agree on the importance of ensuring that children in school are given the best opportunities to succeed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Alan Mak), in an intervention, raised the issue of school breakfasts. The Government are committed to continuing to support school breakfasts. In November last year we extended the national school breakfast programme for an additional year. Overall, we are investing up to £30 million in that programme, which will support up to 2,500 schools in disadvantaged areas, meaning that thousands of children from low-income families will be offered free, nutritious breakfasts to better support their attainment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Winchester also raised the issue of the holiday activities and food programme. This year, the Government are again investing over £200 million in that programme, with all 152 local authorities in England delivering it. Last summer, the programme reached over 685,000 children and young people in England.

The Government support the provision of food in schools so that pupils are well nourished, develop healthy eating habits and can concentrate and learn. The universal infant free school meal policy, introduced by a Conservative-led Government in 2014, is a vital component of that provision.

Munira Wilson: I hope the Minister will recognise that that was a Liberal Democrat policy? It was a flagship policy introduced by the coalition, and we were very proud of it. However, since 2014, as we have heard, the funding for that policy has only risen by 11p, which is why we have the yawning gap that Members have pointed out today. Will the Minister put on record that schools should not be forced to choose between cutting and scrimping on teaching budgets—and other budgets that benefit children—and eroding food standards?

Nick Gibb: Of course, I acknowledge the Liberal Democrats—that is why I said Conservative-led Government. It was a policy of both parties; we believed in it very strongly and we made sacrifices elsewhere in budgets in order to fund it. I acknowledge that it was a coalition Government—a coalition policy—that led to the introduction of universal infant free school meals, which we have maintained ever since.

We recognise the cost pressures that schools and suppliers are facing. Officials are holding regular meetings with other Government Departments and representatives of the food industry to discuss a variety of issues, including public sector food supply. I take this opportunity to thank the companies and organisations that my officials have spoken to for the constructive steps they have taken to deliver services to our schools.

Schools manage their own contracts using Government funding to procure services from private sector caterers or local authorities. Particular pressures have arisen as a result of food price inflation, which has risen higher and faster than the headline consumer prices index rate.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I think everybody in the debate understands the importance of children being well fed in order to learn well, but seven out of 10 families on universal credit are still not receiving free school meals. Given the very strong public support—over 80% of the public support free school meals for children in households receiving universal credit—is it not time to look at that specific group? As the Minister said, food inflation is so high that family budgets have been stretched very thin.

Nick Gibb: One reason why the number of children eligible for benefits-related free school meals has risen from 1.7 million to 1.9 million is the protections we put in place as families move on to universal credit.

I know that, along with transport costs, increased staff costs have also affected the industry, primarily linked to rises in the national minimum wage. We continue to review funding in order to ensure that schools can provide healthy and nutritious meals.

Janet Daby: This is a very serious point that affects children across our constituencies. The Minister says that the Government are reviewing it, but how long it will take for them to do so and when we will get some of the decisions we seek?

Nick Gibb: Of course, we keep all the issues under review and continually look at school funding. We look at the composition of the national funding formula in great detail every year; we are doing so now for the following year.

The funding for the free school meal factor in the national funding formula is increasing by 2.4% for 2023-24 in line with the latest available GDP deflator forecast when the 2023-24 national funding formula was published in July of last year. As a result of the significant extra school funding awarded by the Chancellor in the autumn statement, schools will receive an additional £2 billion in each of the '23-24 and '24-25 academic years.

The core schools budget, which covers schools' day-to-day running costs, including their energy bills and the costs of providing income-related free school meals, rose

from £49.8 billion in '21-22 to £53.8 billion the year after, and will continue to rise to £57.3 billion in '23-24 and £58.8 billion in '24-25. By '24-25, funding per pupil will have risen to its highest ever level in real terms. Those increases provide support to schools to deal with the impact of inflation on their budgets.

We spend about £600 million a year ensuring that an additional 1.25 million infants enjoy a free, healthy and nutritious meal at lunchtime. Combined with around 1.9 million pupils who are eligible for and claim a meal through benefits-related free school meals, this accounts for more than one third of all pupils in school, compared with 2010, when one sixth of pupils were eligible for free school meals. The Government also support a further 90,000 disadvantaged further education students with a free meal at lunchtime.

All children in reception, year 1 and year 2 in England's state-funded schools receive a free meal, and have done since the introduction of the policy in 2014. Schools up and down the country offer free meals to their infant pupils, helping to improve children's education, boost their health and save parents around £400 a year. Universal infant free school meals are funded through a direct grant to schools. To recognise the pressures facing schools, last June we announced an £18 million increase to the per-pupil funding rate for universal infant free school meals to support costs of food, transport and staff wages. That increased rate was backdated to April in recognition of those costs.

We understand the issues that are being raised and acknowledge that factors such as transport costs and the cost of living wage affecting catering workers are having an impact on the amount that can be spent on infant meals in schools. The Government take on board the comments regarding a discrepancy between the funding rate attributed to universal infant free school meals when compared to the rate provided for those pupils in receipt of benefits-related free school meals. The rate of funding for UIFSM is regularly reviewed, and I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester and all other hon. Members taking part in this debate that I am actively looking at this area. All school meals provided under universal infant free school meals are required to adhere to the school food standards, which require school caterers to serve healthy and nutritious food and drinks to ensure that children get the energy and nutrition that they need across the school day.

In recognition of cost pressures on core schools funding, including benefits-related free schools meals, we have already distributed additional funding through a schools supplementary grant. As a result, core schools funding for mainstream schools increased by £2.5 billion in the 2022-23 financial year, compared with the previous year.

It is right that individual schools determine their own budgets for meal provision by taking into account funding received centrally alongside funding for meals paid for by parents. We expect schools to enter into supply contracts accordingly. While the Government set the legal requirements for food provision and standards, we do not set the contract price, which is subject to agreement between schools and the suppliers.

Mrs Hodgson: The Minister mentioned the importance of those meals being healthy, and that is a key factor in UIFSM. It is not just about alleviating food poverty,

but about removing the stigma. On the health point, the four London boroughs that have extended school meals to all primary children have found that obesity rates have fallen by 9.3% in reception children, and 5.6% in year 6 children. Pockets of bad practice on school food are few and far between, and we normally hear about good practice. The Minister will agree that school food is by far the healthiest option. Only 1% of packed lunches have been found to meet the school food standards.

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. Interventions really must be brief.

Nick Gibb: I do not disagree with the hon. Member. Food standards and the regulations are very stringent, and we keep those regulations under review because I want to look at other issues within them. School food can also be used as a way of teaching children to adopt a healthy diet. The hon. Member made her point well.

I talked about schools being responsible for their contracts. Although we are clear that individual schools are responsible for their own budgets, we provide a free advice and guidance service for state schools, aiming to help them save money on existing contracts. The “get help buying for schools” service is made up of various resources to help schools buy goods and services efficiently and in compliance with all the regulations.

In conclusion, the provision of meals to infant pupils in school, and the wellbeing and nutrition of eligible pupils, are at the top of the Government’s priorities. We are monitoring the costs of schools and suppliers, and we have increased funds both directly through the amounts allocated for free school meals and via the universal infant free school meals grant, and indirectly by increasing core schools budgets. I understand and acknowledge the pressures that the industry is facing, and we will continue to take that into account when determining spending priorities.

I am confident that the offer we have in place through universal infant free school meals ensures that those children receive the best start to their time in school. It ensures that they can develop healthy eating habits at an early age, and that they can concentrate and learn. The offer also ensures that the Government continue to provide targeted support to pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds who are most in need.

Question put and agreed to.

11.27 am

Sitting suspended.

Affordable Homes Programme

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Affordable Homes Programme.

It is a pleasure to serve once again under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am so glad to have secured this important debate on the affordable homes programme, and I am immensely grateful to the House authorities for granting it.

Affordable housing is one of the most depressing and urgent issues facing the good people of Slough and communities across our country. Rarely does an advice surgery go by without a constituent raising concerns about their dire housing situation. Although I commend the bold ambitions of the affordable homes programme, which aims to build 180,000 new homes outside London by March 2026, it is clear that when it comes to delivering on housing the Government continue to fall far short of the mark. The reality is that we face an affordable housing crisis. The basic promise made to each generation that if they work hard they can one day own their own home has been broken.

I speak to young people in their 20s and 30s, often with children, who tell me the same thing: they have as much chance of settling on the moon as they have of buying a home in Slough. This week the estate agent’s window shows a four-bedroom house in Slough for £750,000, a two-bedroom bungalow for £525,000 and a one-bedroom flat for £300,000. Even with an elusive 5% deposit mortgage, those prices are way beyond the reach of shopkeepers, teachers, nurses, home care assistants, police officers, firefighters and even junior doctors.

Since the Conservatives came to power about 13 years ago, 800,000 fewer households under 45 own their home, and 1 million more people are renting—so much for the “property-owning democracy”. The answer would be a renewed social rented sector, but the number of truly affordable homes being built has fallen by 80%. The system is broken and the Conservative Government are doing next to nothing to fix it.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): We are all aware of the housing crisis that Britain faces, but I am pleased we have a Labour-led council in Manchester that understands the problem and has set out a plan to build at least 10,000 affordable homes across our city in the next decade, with more than 1,000 affordable homes and 250 new council houses in the coming year. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Tory Government in Westminster are failing to match the vision of Labour councils to tackle the housing crisis?

Mr Dhesi: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I commend Manchester City Council, the Mayor of Greater Manchester—my good friend Andy Burnham—and others who have made sure that councillors and Members of Parliament have come together to have that ambitious house building programme, but it seems the Government are asleep at the wheel. They have made bold statements, but are not following through. I am sure it has nothing to do with the fact that one in four Tory MPs are private landlords.

[*Mr Dhesi*]

The much respected organisation Shelter reports that there are 1.4 million fewer households in social housing than there were in 1980. Combined with excessive house prices making homes unaffordable, demand has been shunted into the private rental sector, where supply has been too slow to meet need. That means above-inflation increases in rents, especially in the south of England and in places such as Slough.

On the affordable homes programme, the National Audit Office reports that there is a 32,000 shortfall in the Government's original targets for building affordable homes. It goes on to say that there is a "high risk" of failing to meet targets on supported homes and homes in rural areas. Ministers' targets will be confounded by double-digit inflation, soaring costs of materials and supply disruption, yet the Government seem to have no clue how to mitigate those factors. Perhaps the Minister will enlighten us today. As the NAO report outlines, the issue is not just the number of homes, and I share the NAO's concerns that there is also a lack of focus on the quality, size and environmental standards of the new homes. Perhaps the Minister will also be able to provide some reassurance on those important points.

The NAO is not the only one with concerns about the delivery of the programme. I am pleased that the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), is here for the debate, and I am sure she will attest to the fact that in December the Committee's report outlined that the Minister's Department

"does not seem to have a grasp on the considerable risks to achieving even this lower number of homes, including construction costs inflation running at 15-30% in and around London."

Exactly when will the revisions to the 2021 plan be published, as recommended and agreed by the Minister's Department?

The fact is that we need a renewed national effort to fix the housing market and fulfil the promise of owning one's own home to the next generation. That national effort may well have to wait for the election of a Labour Government, which will have a target of 70% home ownership.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for this important debate. Under the leadership of Ian Ward, Birmingham has committed to having 60,000 additional houses, but unfortunately, as my hon. Friend says, cost rises mean that that will be difficult to achieve. Also, housing associations create traps for people in my community, who are unable to afford to buy their properties or to have their children take them over. That is not the way forward; we need councils to be properly resourced to build the houses.

Mr Dhesi: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I commend the work of Councillor Ian Ward, whom I met recently. During my recent visit to Birmingham, I was able to meet council members, who spoke about their hopes and aspirations, but also to the constraints on them given limited resources from Government—indeed, they alluded to the high inflation they now have to contend with.

People sometimes say, "How can there be a housing crisis when there are cranes on our skylines and new houses and flats going up all over?" But those homes

are rarely affordable and are often snapped up by investors off plan. Many remain empty—an investment by overseas property tycoons. That leaves hollowed-out communities with flats but no residents. That is why I am so glad that the Labour party has pledged to close the loopholes developers exploit to avoid building more affordable housing and give first-time buyers first dibs on new developments. I very much hope to hear more about those exciting plans from the Labour party spokesman, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), later in the debate.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. It is not just Labour councils but Conservative-controlled councils that give land to the developers. There is one development on Broadway where the average house costs £800,000, which is way beyond the reach of most of my constituents. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as well as putting targets on developers, we must give housing associations the freedom to build houses? We see people at our surgeries crying out for homes. We must look at the need and then give housing associations the freedom to build those houses.

Mr Dhesi: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. The experiences she has at her advice surgeries talking to her constituents chime neatly with what I am being told. Yes, we must empower housing associations and others to build homes. The focus especially on building council homes is incredibly important, because that is where we as a nation are failing. There is huge demand for council housing in particular, not just in Walsall but in my constituency, but there is just not the supply to go around. That must urgently be looked at. Those targets are being missed.

I hope that Labour will end the scandalous practice of foreign buyers purchasing swathes of new housing developments off plan before local people can even see them. We will strengthen the rights of tenants with a new private renters charter. Only a generation ago a couple in work could aspire to get on the property ladder, to eventually pay off their mortgage and to give their children a helping hand. Today, that dream is out of reach for millions thanks to the utter failure of this Government. The Housing Minister, the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), is the 15th since the Tories came to power and the sixth to hold the post in the past 12 months alone. What hope do ordinary people have with such chaos at the very heart of Government?

Labour will build the homes that people need. We will take steps to meet demand in the decades to come and we must also boost social housing, as I said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz). That is how a Labour Government will fix Britain's broken housing market for people in Slough and across our nation.

If the Government cannot, or will not, commit to matching Labour's focus on this vital issue, if they cannot deliver genuinely affordable homes and if they continue to let this programme fall even further behind, they should just admit that they have given up trying to help the millions struggling with housing across our country.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend on his speech on this really important issue. Does he agree that language is very important and that the word “affordable” suggests something that people on a normal income could afford? However, we all know that the word “affordable” in housing circles actually means 80% of market rent, which is unaffordable for most people. In some of the constituencies represented by Members present, that is unaffordable even for the Member themselves.

Mr Dhesi: I thank my hon. Friend for that very valid point. It is one that many of us have been making for years. Definitions are incredibly important. What is affordable to one person is unaffordable to another. That is why a laser-like focus, on social housing in particular, is incredibly important; many people cannot afford to get into the private rented sector, let alone buy their own home. I fully agree with my hon. Friend.

The Government must act urgently. If they cannot, perhaps they should step aside for those of us who want to, and can, deliver the transformative changes needed to guarantee that home ownership once again becomes a reality for all generations.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 4 pm. I am obliged to call the Front-Bench spokespeople no later than 3.37 pm, and the guidelines are that the Opposition spokesperson and the Minister should have 10 minutes each. The mover of the motion will have three minutes to sum up the debate at the end. Until 3.37 pm, which is just under an hour away, we are in Back-Bench time. I am confident that everyone will get in if no one speaks for too long.

2.44 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for securing this debate.

Britain’s housing market is broken. Renters have been priced out of the cities they have called home for their entire lives. Young people cannot get a foot on the ladder, and most of the homes that are built are unaffordable. Research by Crisis and the National Housing Federation found that, over the next decade, 145,000 affordable homes must be built each year, with 90,000 of those for social rent, if we are going to meet housing needs in England alone. The truth is that we are nowhere near meeting the overwhelming need that already exists. With only 13% of homes built between 2021 and 2022 designated for social rent, it is clear that the Government are not taking this crisis seriously. The scale of the challenge ahead is monumental, and Ministers have their heads in the sand, hoping it will all just go away.

Let me demonstrate the problem to the Minister, using statistics from my constituency, which has been badly affected. The statistics clearly outline how the housing crisis in this country has spiralled out of control over the past 13 years. In Coventry, the number of new social housing lettings has fallen by more than a third over the past decade. Looking at the most recent figures, 1,939 of the new social housing lettings were in the most affordable category, down from over 4,000 10 years ago.

We have nearly 6,000 households stuck on the waiting list, chasing the handful of homes that ever become available.

Behind those numbers are the lives of thousands of constituents whose futures are being robbed from them by a lack of decent housing. I want to give three examples of constituents who have been affected. The first has four sons, who are cramped into one bedroom, denied any privacy or space to revise for next month’s exams. The lack of any ground-floor flats has left the second constituent, crippled from a lifetime of hard physical labour, sleeping on his sofa and doing his washing in the sink. My third constituent is a cancer patient who needs round-the-clock care but who is trapped in a tiny bedsit up a flight of stairs he can barely climb, with no facilities for anyone to stay with him overnight and nowhere to move.

What more evidence do the Government need to accept the scale of the housing crisis that has grown and grown since they came into power? Change is overdue. The inaction of Ministers has left us gripped by a planning and development free-for-all where developers hold all the power. They decide which type of homes are built, where they are built and the prices they are sold for. They are accountable to absolutely nobody—not residents, not local councils and not even the Government in Westminster. Even as we speak, thousands of Coventry families are being denied a modest social home, while historic hedgerows and badger setts are being torn out in Keresley by developers constructing half-a-million-pound executive mansions, which are irrelevant to local need and built solely for private profit.

The big picture is really bad. The specifics of the planning system, however, are even worse. Take housing targets. Coventry has long been singled out for unfair treatment by this Government, who demand that more and more houses be built every year but do nothing to ensure there is enough social housing for those in need. For years, Whitehall ignored Coventry’s residents and councillors, who said time and again that the projections were wrong. Time and again our concerns were cast aside, with Ministers simply too gutless to order an investigation that might uncover an inconvenient truth. Tacked on to this is the 35% uplift—a further inflation of figures that bear no relation to the lack of brownfield sites in our city or the housing mix Coventry residents need.

Thanks to the census, the facts are now clear. The Government’s population estimates were wrong by a massive 30,000 people, rendering the plans drawn up as a result of those figures virtually worthless. Now our councillors are left having to revise the local plan to make up for the unforgivable errors of Ministers—errors that the council reported long ago and that were ignored by those in Westminster, despite the fact I raised the issue on several occasions with the Minister’s predecessor.

As it stands, the planning system is a shambles. A complete overhaul is desperately needed, with local communities and local government in the driving seat. That way, they can set the direction of travel for new developments in their neighbourhood, delivering affordable homes for families exactly where they are needed. The housing crisis will only get worse unless the Government reform planning and deliver for the needs of people up and down the country. I hope the Minister will outline what steps the Government are taking to achieve that reform.

2.49 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I thank my good and hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for securing such a vital debate on affordable housing. I echo a point made by Members across the Chamber. My definition of affordable housing, and certainly that of my constituents, is somewhat different from the Government's definition of 80% of market rents. That is certainly not affordable for people in many cities, including those in the south-east, London, Birmingham and Manchester, or for people in parts of my constituency. It is beyond the reach of far too many people. All we have to do is look at the evidence, with 1.2 million people and rising on the housing need register and the 300,000 children referenced by the National Housing Federation living in cramped accommodation, sharing beds with siblings. It is simply not good enough. It demonstrates that the housing crisis is one of affordability up and down the country.

I could also refer to the pitiful number of homes—7,400—built for social rent last year. When we take into account those lost through right to buy and demolition, we see that the actual figure for last year was minus 14,000. If we map every year over the last 13 years, we see that the average net loss is about 12,000 homes, which is simply not good enough.

The evidence from the National Housing Federation and Shelter, which was referenced by my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi), shows that about 90,000 homes for social rent should be built every year over a decade. How could the Government fund that? They could reconfigure the affordable homes programme of £11.4 billion and stop much of the £23 billion of housing benefit going to substandard housing, as evidenced in a City Hall report last year.

I want to focus on a particular development in the Weaver Vale patch that could be completed if a Government Minister were to intervene. Homes England is involved in the development. A number of developments are taking place across Weaver Vale in Helsby, Sandymoor and Hartford, which will result in more than 1,000 properties being built. A number of them will be built through section 106 in terms of housing associations. The properties are probably three-quarters completed, but they are now subject to vandalism because Lane End Developments, which was based in Warrington, has gone into administration. The same is true of other market-led developers, given the downturn in the market and the fact that planning applications are down by 16%.

My plea to the Minister, who is currently rather busy on his mobile phone, is for him to intervene on the development. *[Interruption.]* Yes, thank you for taking notes. I have written to Homes England. The development would meet targets that the Government no longer seem to have, but it would also, importantly, ensure that constituents in my patch could fulfil their dreams and hopes. It would enable some to get on to the property ladder, some to go into shared ownership, and others to get homes under the current definition of affordable rent. Of course, what we need is 90,000 houses a year and a generation of social housing. I look forward to the day when we have a Labour Government who can realise that ambition.

2.54 pm

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing this vital debate. He highlighted that the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office have looked into this issue. I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and declare that I am the landlord of a property in the private rented sector.

Affordable housing is critical for my constituency. Many of my constituents live in very overcrowded conditions, as my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) highlighted. Every week I am out on doorsteps, doing surgeries and visiting people where they live. There are many examples of four children sharing a bedroom, and of a family living in the living room and another in the bedroom. Families are experiencing severe overcrowding without any hope of moving out. I will touch on that in a moment. Too many people just cannot afford to rent in the private sector or to buy, given that rates are very high, and the Government have changed the definition of "affordable" repeatedly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) highlighted. Crucially, we are just not building enough housing.

The record of the affordable homes programme speaks for itself. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, on whose behalf the Minister is here to answer, set out to deliver 180,000 homes in 2021. It has already downgraded that forecast to 157,000 homes, but half of them will be for ownership, not rent. I am not someone who wants to get in the way of home ownership, but it is not even a distant dream for those of my constituents for whom renting privately is not an option. They just need somewhere to live, so we need social housing in London. Of course, the impacts of inflation and construction challenges put the figure of 157,000 at even more risk. The Government's original intention was to build 300,000 new homes a year by the mid-2020s. Some of them were to be affordable homes, but we have not been given a figure, so I want to delve into that.

Let us pick up on the issue of definitions. Perhaps the Minister could take away the thought that we are conflating or confusing a multiplicity of markets. We have the full ownership market, but we also have affordable home ownership and shared ownership, which poses challenges for many people because they are liable for the whole property but own only part of the equity and pay rent on the rest. The term "affordable" was defined by the previous Mayor of London and former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), as 80% of private rents. Well, good luck with that in Hackney, where it is simply unaffordable for many people.

There are various definitions for key worker housing, depending on where the development is—the term is very ill defined in law and regulation. At least social rented housing has a rent escalator model set out in law, so tenants have an idea of what they will be paying. That has, of course, been capped because of inflation rates. I welcome that for residents, but it does also create a problem for properties in desperate need of investment. There is also, of course, the private rented sector. Although it has been subject to more regulation, there is nothing

about the level of rent and it does not have anything like a rent escalator model. That means that tenants can find their rent going up exponentially after spending only a year in their home. We are increasingly seeing that across the piece in my constituency and throughout London.

Social housing is critical. There are people in Hackney who work hard in good jobs, such as the hospital porter I visited, who is renting a room in a private home. He was living with his daughter, and they rented a room each in a private home. When the private landlady put up the rent from £400 to £550 a month for each room, they could no longer afford to rent two rooms, so he was living with his then 17-year-old daughter—she is now nearly 20—in one private room, because he could not qualify for social housing. As he was not homeless, he would not even get into temporary housing—not that that is a pathway people want to go down.

Five years ago, if people had been in temporary housing for six months I would encourage them to hang on in there because a prized council or housing association property would eventually become available. It is now increasingly the case that people spend more than three years in temporary housing. Recently, a family I was dealing with were rehoused from Hackney to Wellingborough. There are other examples, with the excellent head of homelessness at Hackney Council, Jennifer Wynter, saying that this is the worst situation she has known in her long career, and warning all of us not to raise people's hopes that a home in Hackney will be a real possibility.

The Department's own figures show that homes built for social rent provide higher value for money than those built for ownership. This thoughtful Minister used to be a member of the Public Accounts Committee. If he looked at the figures, I think that he, along with the Secretary of State, could be an advocate in his Department for social renting housing. The problem is that the Government, who are not meeting their targets, are chasing numbers, which means fewer social rented properties for the money. We want to see more homes, but we need social rented housing, and it is no good building homes that people just cannot afford to live in. We have a sore need for such properties, yet the Government rejected the Public Accounts Committee's recommendation to assess the demand for social rent.

Sometimes the Government also respond to reports in a confusing way. A recommendation report notes:

"The government will work with delivery agencies to confirm the 2021 programme's capacity to deliver homes for Social Rent as part of the review"

of the delivery of housing, and that they

"will confirm the programme's ability to deliver an increased proportion of homes for social rent to Parliament at the same time as confirming the programme's overall delivery targets."

I could read that in all sorts of ways. I like to read it positively, as saying that the Department is determined to see an increased proportion of social rented housing. I hope the Minister can clarify exactly what the Government mean in that response.

It is worth putting the challenge in Hackney in context. I make no apology for repeating these figures. There are currently 3,100 households in temporary accommodation, 51% of which—more than half—are housed outside the borough due to a lack of supply. There are 3,528 children

in temporary accommodation. That is enough to fill eight primary schools and is equivalent to 1% of Hackney's population. We are having to close primary schools because of falling numbers. Many of those families would love to send their children to school in Hackney, but they cannot live there because there are not enough permanent homes. I have had so many tragic conversations with constituents in my surgeries or the living rooms of their temporary accommodation. They think that if they hang on, they will get a property in Hackney, where their kids are still at school, but I have to say to them, "You are not going to be in Hackney for some years. You have a five-year tenancy somewhere else so you need to think about moving your children." They are aghast and upset, but that is the reality. Children are being shuttled around to schools where there are places; they are not going to schools their parents choose.

Average waiting times for council and housing association housing for homeless households is now nine years for a three-bedroom property—of course, that is a notional figure—and 12 years for a two-bedroom property. That is a lifetime for a child. Children are growing up in massively overcrowded conditions. They often live in a single room in accommodation or, if they are lucky, a couple of rooms in a hotel. Sometimes, they are in temporary, rented accommodation elsewhere, but with no certainty and, even if their parents are bidding for properties, no real prospect of getting a home anywhere near any time soon.

Homelessness in the borough is increasing rapidly. The number of households seeking support increased by 44% between 2017-18 and 2021-22. Hackney Council anticipates that the number will continue to increase by about 8% a year. That is just one London borough, but I am sure my colleagues across London will say the same. It was interesting to hear that in Coventry the experiences are very similar. In Hackney, that would be considered cheap housing, compared with what we have to deal with.

I pay tribute to the Mayor of Hackney, Philip Glanville, who is doing his utmost to build council housing—affordable, secure homes—but for pretty much every one he builds, he has to have one for sale to cross-subsidise because there is not a Government subsidy, despite the Government's own figures showing that investment in bricks-and-mortar subsidy is the most cost-effective way of delivering these homes.

I am sure the Minister is thoughtful enough to take on board the cost of poor housing to the Exchequer. The Public Accounts Committee looked at the private rented sector. In my constituency, ownership is out of reach for so many people—average house prices are at ridiculous levels—so people are living in the private rented sector. The National Audit Office concluded that 13% of privately rented properties—589,000 of them—pose a serious threat to their tenants' health and safety. The Committee and the National Audit Office estimated the cost of that to the health service to be £340 million per annum, so it really is spend to save. I know it is difficult for any Department to sell that to the Treasury, but I am sure that if the Minister wanted to join forces with us on this issue, we could all work together to persuade the Treasury that spending money, investing in people's homes and getting them on a stable footing is better for everybody.

[*Dame Meg Hillier*]

This is not rocket science. We need more homes to be built, and we need to unblock the logjam that is stopping that. We do not have the time to go into all the reasons for that, but we need more social housing that is actually affordable for people on average wages—people who work hard every day but have no prospect of buying a home. Some even find it hard to afford council rent. There are issues there, but we certainly need council rented housing and housing association housing. We need pathways to home ownership, but every time someone buys under right to buy, that is another home lost to the local council or the housing association, and that is not a path that many people can pursue.

Many years ago, when I was a councillor in Islington, we would pay people about £16,000 to move from their council property to help them buy a property elsewhere, so they freed it up. That is actually good value for money. Who would have thought that the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee would be standing here saying, “Give tenants who want to move the money to do so”? Sure, home ownership is understandably a dream for many people, but it should not be a dream that is out of reach. We could free up the housing we have for those who have the wherewithal and ability to move into other homes.

We need better rights and stability for private tenants. People live in a home with a year’s tenancy, perhaps, but cannot be sure from year to year whether their children can stay at the same school. It is an upheaval in a family’s life. Now, increasingly, as people are evicted, rents are going through the roof, as many landlords exit the market. In summary, I believe firmly—I hope that the Minister concurs and will tell us how he will help to achieve this—that people need a safe, secure and long-term home as the foundation for their life and, crucially, the springboard for opportunity.

3.5 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): There is a consequence to not building homes other than the numbers, and that is families living in temporary accommodation. That currently costs the UK taxpayer £1.6 billion a year. I do not know about other hon. Members in this Chamber, but I can think of a lot better ways to spend £1.6 billion.

I stand to speak out of desperation from what I see every single Friday at my advice surgery. I represent half of the London borough of Merton, which is certainly not the London borough under the greatest pressure for housing or temporary accommodation, but since last April even Merton has seen a 41% increase in the numbers of people in temporary accommodation. The numbers are tiny in comparison with the 3,000 in Hackney, but our numbers have increased from 243 to 343 units.

Also, when we use the word “temporary”—as I said earlier, language is important—at the moment it means five years. By the time we get to the end of five years, it will mean 10 years, or maybe 15 or 20 years—we just do not know. There is simply no way out of this appalling struggle.

Currently, in England, 99,000 families—including 125,000 children—live in temporary accommodation. That is an increase of 71% between 2012 and 2018, and a further

41% between 2018 and 2022. I give hon. Members those figures so that they have some idea of the scale of the problem we are experiencing. In June 2022, 26,130 of those families were placed in a borough outside their home, taking their kids out of school, their families away from their support networks, and individuals from jobs and away from NHS facilities that they might desperately need.

Once we remove a desperate, vulnerable family from their environment, there are consequences for the children in school attainment and attendance, and all sorts of other things. I say without any pleasure at all that, in the statistics of child mortality between 2019 and 2022, 34 children’s deaths were seen as a direct consequence of their temporary accommodation. I am happy to take the Minister to the temporary accommodation that many of the families that I represent have to live in.

I will talk to the House about Mr and Mrs N. They live in a shed in the garden of a house in multiple occupation. They have the benefit of the fact that it is in Streatham, so only around the corner from my constituency. They have two rooms and four children. The smell in the bathroom is so appalling that, put simply, no one would want to enter it. And the ants are obvious, crawling across the floor. Last week, when we beseeched the homeless department to move them somewhere else, the only place that it had to offer was in Reading. That family chose their ant-infested home over having to be moved many miles away from where they had any support or help.

I give that example not because it is unique, but because it is absolutely appalling. Unless we do something, we will have more children die of damp and mould growth, and we will have more desperate families. We will pay for that not just in human lives but in taxpayers’ money well into the next century. It is time to do something now.

3.9 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing the debate. He made an excellent speech, as did all the other speakers.

It might not be obvious why I am going to take my contribution in this direction, but I am going to outline a situation that developed recently in my constituency, which has a link to housing and should be aired publicly. Today I spoke to Councillor Michael Baird, who represents North, West and Central Sutherland, one of the biggest wards in the United Kingdom. It is 1,800 square miles—the size of three Greater Londons and 18 Edinburghs. It is vast.

Michael has outlined to me a harrowing situation. He and his fellow councillors have one facility for the elderly in the entire ward—in that vast area. It is called Caladh Sona and is in the tiny village of Talmine on the north coast of Scotland. It has six care beds and, at the moment, four residents. NHS Highland has announced that it will close the facility in 12 weeks, and the residents will be moved to the two nearest homes, one of which is in Thurso, 47 miles away, whereas the other—if they can get beds—is in Golspie, 62 miles away. I think about those old people being moved and about their families, their loved ones, trying to see them. It is a lot harder with distances such as that.

I think also about the remaining staff. They have been offered jobs somewhere else, but will have to move from their community or make long commutes, sometimes in pretty dreadful winter weather. This is happening because the home cannot get the staff needed to run it, and that is because—this is where I return to the agenda—there is not the housing. If a house comes on the market on the north coast of Sutherland, it is snapped up as a holiday home or becomes an Airbnb. It is so like what everyone else is saying. If we cannot get the carers, we are in real trouble.

To echo what everyone has said this afternoon, if young people's families cannot get an affordable home, they will not live there, and that means that school rolls drop and we have that old, dark monster of depopulation, which we had for far too long—for hundreds of years in the highlands. People up sticks and away. They go to Canada, Australia and America and never come back. That is one reason why we have a diaspora of Scots all over the world.

What can we do about it? It is ironic that we have one of the greatest sources of renewable energy, that is, land-based wind farms, in my constituency. Some of the money that the wind farms make could help the local authority—the Highland Council—a housing association or whatever to buy properties when they come on the market. An old expression we used to use has already been referred to: key worker housing. That is the key. Even if they come up for only five days a week, if we can offer a carer somewhere to live that they can afford, we will go some way to looking after the old people. As the oldest member of my party in this place, I can remember when houses were being built in the 1960s in my hometown of Tain. They were going up and it was great. There was hope that people would be housed, but the situation is very different today.

I will conclude with what the hon. Member for Slough said: we need a renewed national effort. By goodness, we certainly do. I am aware that housing is devolved, but I am sure that Members who belong to the Scottish Government's party would admit that there is a major problem, just as hon. Members have described this afternoon. There has to be a renewed national effort. It has to involve all the nations of the United Kingdom, and we have to get it going, because if we do not, we are going back to the bad old days of our past. That is something that we thought was dead, buried and gone forever, but it seems to have come back. Action has to be taken.

3.15 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing this important debate and on the compelling speech with which he opened it. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi), for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) and for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for participating this afternoon and for a series of powerful speeches.

The debate has covered a range of concerns, many relating to the housing crisis more widely, but, on the specific matter of the affordable homes programme,

most fell within two broad categories—namely, the performance of the programme over recent years and the more fundamental issues of its design and purpose. I want to address each of those in turn.

When it comes to the performance of the programme, there is clearly significant room for improvement. The comprehensive National Audit Office report on the operation of the AHP since 2015, which was published last year, details concerns on to a wide range of issues—including governance, transparency and oversight—many of which were echoed in a report published shortly afterwards by the Public Accounts Committee. I would be grateful if, as part of his response, the Minister could tell the House whether the Department has acted on the eight specific recommendations made by the NAO in its report, and could take the opportunity to update hon. Members on the steps that his Department committed to taking in its response to the PAC.

A particular criticism levelled at the programme by both the NAO and the PAC and referenced by my hon. Friend the Member for Slough in opening the debate was the fact that targets were unlikely to be met. We know that, taken together, the 2016 and 2021 programmes are likely to miss their combined target by approximately 32,000 homes, with a shortfall of 9,000 starts under the 2016 programme compounded by a projected 23,000 shortfall in the current one. There is also a clear risk that the programme will fail to meet its sub-targets on supported accommodation and rural housing.

Opposition Members recognise that some of the factors undermining delivery on the targets are entirely out of the Government's control, but there are others—such as local planning authority capacity and the need for funding and financing mechanisms to support providers in upgrading their stock—that the Government could take more proactive steps to mitigate. Might the Minister provide us with some assurance this afternoon that the Government are at least actively looking at what more can be done in that regard? Can he also explain whether and, if so, how rules about grant funding under the current programme might be being made more flexible—not least in terms of increased grant funding per unit—with a view to sustaining the Department's central forecast of 157,000 completions in the face of inflationary pressure?

Lastly, when it comes to assessing the overall performance of the programme, effective scrutiny is still very much hampered by the absence of transparency and open reporting. The Department has now committed to providing an annual report to Parliament on programme delivery, but might the Minister go further today and commit at least to having Homes England publish its annual AHP targets, as the Greater London Authority has already done?

Let me turn to the design and purpose of the programme. One of the more damning conclusions of the NAO report was that the AHP lacks strong incentives for housing providers to deliver affordable homes in areas of high housing need and high affordability pressure. I would be grateful if the Minister could therefore update the House on how the Department is improving the way it works with local authorities to address local need, and tell us whether any further measures are being explored to ensure that more grant-funded affordable housing flows to areas of high need.

Providing more homes in such areas is, of course, not the only wider Government objective in respect of which the current programme is falling short. To me at least,

[*Matthew Pennycook*]

it simply beggars belief that both the Department and Homes England did not include any specific targets relating to emissions reductions in the 2021 programme, with the result that outside London the Government are financing the construction of new affordable homes that in all likelihood we will have to retrofit in years to come.

The Government have committed to exploring the cost and deliverability of additional net zero requirements, but only in a successor to the 2021 programme.

Valerie Vaz: My hon. Friend is making an interesting speech. Does he agree that every new home should have a solar panel fitted when it is built?

Matthew Pennycook: There is a strong case for that. It is an issue—one of many—that we are exploring in detail. The situation speaks to a wider failure, which is the abolition of the zero homes standard by, I think, the coalition Government. We built tens if not hundreds of thousands of homes over recent years that we will have to retrofit at great cost. The least we can do is change the criteria the programme operates on, so that at least we build net zero-ready homes for which we will not have to do that in years to come. I would be grateful if the Minister could explain what precisely is stopping changes being made to the programme to ensure, as the Greater London Authority has done, that all new grant-funded homes are net zero carbon and air quality neutral.

Those issues aside, there is the more fundamental and important question of whether the programme provides the right kind of homes to meet affordable housing need in England. The answer of Labour Members is a categorical no. We believe it is a problem that the programme has constrained the overall amount of grant funding available for sub-market rented homes while also failing to deliver an increase in the supply of low-cost home ownership properties. We believe it is a problem that the Government's decision to prioritise the so-called affordable rent tenure of up to 80% of local market rents has squeezed the amount of programme funding available for new homes for social rent and ballooned the number of households in temporary accommodation and on local housing waiting lists, as well as the housing benefit bill, as a result. Those are not technical design flaws; they reflect political choices about what a national affordable housing programme should aim to achieve and whether its primary purpose should be meeting the needs of people on the lowest incomes.

There is a clear difference of opinion between the Opposition and the Government on this matter. We believe the overriding purpose of a national affordable housing programme should be to provide as many genuinely affordable homes as possible, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch rightly argued. The Government believe, at least post-2018, that the purpose of such a programme is to provide—reluctantly—a small number of genuinely affordable social rented homes and a much larger number of sub-market rented and home ownership units that are branded as affordable, but, in practice, are anything but for many low-income households in swathes of the country. That is why—with the debasement of language we have seen in recent years

in the concept of affordable housing—the Housing and Planning Minister could argue with a straight face in a debate that took place last week on the future of social housing that Conservative-led Governments since 2010 have outperformed the last Labour Government on affordable housing, despite the fact that the last Labour Government built over twice as many social homes as Conservative-led Governments since 2010 have managed, and that at no point over the past decade has annual social housing supply ever matched the levels delivered by the last Labour Government.

We want the performance of the affordable homes programme to improve between now and the general election, and I look forward to the Minister detailing the various ways in which the Government are attempting to achieve that. But as laudable an aim as fine-tuning the existing programme is, Labour is clear that a very different programme will be required in the future to markedly increase the supply of new net zero-ready, genuinely affordable homes to rent and buy, as is our aim. It is an aim based on a reassessment of the amount of grant funding directed toward sub-market rent and the building of social rented homes in particular; on a review of the scope of eligible sub-market products, not least the so-called affordable rent tenure; and on a reappraisal of whether there are better low-cost home ownership products than shared ownership.

3.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions and thank the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for instigating the debate. We may have disagreements about the methods by which we ensure that people can enjoy the fruits of home ownership and have a roof over their heads, but I think we would all, collectively, irrespective of what side we are on in this Chamber, agree that it is absolutely vital to have a housing sector that supports those who need it and provides the platform for people to be able to aspire to move into home ownership. That has been the case for the past century, and it has been such a success within this country.

I start by acknowledging the underlining point made by a number of hon. and right hon. Members, which is that there are challenges at the moment, including those that have grown in the immediate term, such as inflation, the cost of construction and materials and labour challenges, which all create issues in ensuring that we can make progress on our shared objectives. If we are truthful, that is also set within the context—I am not seeking to make a particularly political point, as it has developed under successive Governments of all colours over the past 30 or 40 years—of the number of houses that are built in this country and, flowing from that, the number of people who can have access to them, and the number of people who can enjoy home ownership in general. I think we have made progress on that as a Government, but I know there is a keenness to go further in the years ahead.

The Government support ensuring that people have a place to live, a place to thrive, a place to grow and a place to bring up families, which, in many instances, will be through affordable housing and social rent, but

we also inherently believe in the importance of home ownership as a moral end in itself, providing the ability for people to make choices, grow capital and pass assets on to their family over their lives. The comments in today's debate have underscored the need for more homes of all tenures, whether to rent, to buy or to part buy, on the way, hopefully, to fully buying in time.

On the specifics of the affordable homes programme, the whole point of the programme, which has nearly £12 billion of taxpayer subsidy—we are taking money from people that they would otherwise be able to spend themselves—is that we recognise the importance of some of the points made in the debate. Launched in 2020, that nearly £12 billion support—£11.5 billion—represents a significant taxpayer subsidy for affordable housing and a clear commitment to delivering tens of thousands of homes for sale and rent throughout the country.

Social rent has been raised by a number of colleagues, and I will come to their specific points in the moment. We brought social rented homes into the scope of the affordable homes programme in 2018 and we affirmed our commitment to increasing the supply of social rented homes in the levelling-up White Paper, which was published last year, as well as to improving the quality of housing across the board, in both the private and rental sector. I will come on to that point in a moment, when I respond to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh). We have changed the parameters for the affordable homes programme to support that commitment, which enables further increases in the share of social rental homes that we plan to deliver.

Furthermore, the affordable homes programme is committed to funding a mix of tenures, enabling developers to deliver mixed communities that will ensure that people can buy, part buy and rent where they need to. That is why we have kept a commitment to delivering homes for affordable rent, where rent is typically capped at 80% of the prevailing rate. Yet it is home ownership that we want people truly to benefit from, and we want people to benefit from it as much as is possible. We understand the difference that an increased sense of security can make to all aspects of someone's life and the lives of their families. That is why home ownership is a fundamental part of the affordable homes programme and why there is a significant element of homes for shared ownership, which can help people staircase up.

Dame Meg Hillier: The Minister said some warm words there about the need for social housing. In response to the Public Accounts Committee report, the Government indicated that local authorities would have more say over the mix of tenure in their area. In areas like mine, where the real need is for social rented housing, that requires more Government grant compared with areas where low-cost home ownership is genuinely an option. In Hackney, with the price as it is, home ownership will be very difficult to achieve. Can he flesh out how local authorities can deliver what they know is needed in their area and how Government grant will follow those decisions?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that point. She is an assiduous follower of this issue. I know of all the fantastic work that she and her colleagues on the Public Accounts Committee do on this area and

elsewhere. I fear I might not be able to give her an absolute answer, but I will try to provide as much information as I can. There is obviously a challenge, broader than the specifics of this debate, about the amount of money that the Government have; that is not particularly newsworthy. If I may make a tiny partisan point: the Labour party, if it ever gets into Government, will have to make more choices than Opposition spokesmen indicate when they respond to such debates. There will always be a challenge around how we prioritise funding, and what the trade-offs are to do that. The commitment from the Government is here, with the £12 billion contribution that has already been indicated for allocation.

When we come forward with further information about the affordable homes programme 2021-26, I hope we will be able to give greater clarity for those authorities that seek a particular mix of housing and to expand the number of affordable homes of whichever tenure. I also hope that some of the changes coming through in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill will take effect, although that needs to complete its progress in the other place. We will have to see what the other place does to that Bill, which I hope will give local councils some ability to flex their approach in the area of housing.

Matthew Pennycook: Will the Minister give way?

Lee Rowley: I want to make progress.

Matthew Pennycook: On that specific point?

Lee Rowley: Go on then—the hon. Gentleman has convinced me.

Matthew Pennycook: The Minister is right that, when it comes to designing an affordable homes programme, choices have to be made and trade-offs confronted, but does it not trouble him that, despite the fact that 50% of AHP funding under the current programme is allocated to low-cost home ownership, his own Department's figures make it clear that grant funding under the last year of the previous Labour Government still delivered twice the number of low-cost home ownership units than the Government managed last year?

Lee Rowley: Before I answer that question, I hope the Chair will allow me a minute or two more than 10 minutes, given that we have a little bit of time, in order to answer these interventions.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. It is just a guideline, not a rule. The Minister can speak all the way until 3.57 pm, if he wishes.

Lee Rowley: I will not detain colleagues to that extent, but I am grateful for the confirmation that I can continue. The hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) is keen to make a comparison. The fundamental thing that we are trying to do at the moment is weigh up a series of very challenging economic circumstances, recognising the context of housing supply, which has been a challenge for the entirety of my life. We recognise that we have to make progress for the very reasons that right hon. and hon. Members have outlined over the course of the debate. It is so important to do so, given that housing supply affects and impacts the lives of real people.

[*Lee Rowley*]

Let me comment on individual contributions. The hon. Member for Slough, opening the debate, emphasised the importance of the property-owning democracy, which I wholeheartedly agree with. I hope we can make progress on that and also address some points made by other hon. Members. He also said that there should be greater clarity on the affordable housing programme going forward. Although I am not able to give that in today's debate, we have said that we will come back in the spring with further clarity about what is happening; there is not a huge amount of spring left, so I hope it will not be too much longer before my housing colleagues in the Department will do so. I anticipate the Department being able to provide further information to the hon. Member and others in the coming weeks.

The hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) raised a number of points about the inherent challenges in the housing market and of trade-off. During my brief tenure as the Housing Minister back in the autumn, we had a debate in this very place about some of the issues, and she spoke then with regard to Coventry specifically. I cannot talk about Coventry individually, but I will put on record, if hon. Members allow me, the progress that has been made in the past 13 years. I realise that many colleagues will not necessarily want to point to that, but it is important for balance that we do.

Two million homes have been built in this country since 2010, and almost 1 million people—over 800,000—have been helped into ownership through schemes such as help to buy. Some 630,000 new affordable homes have been built. Last year, the registered supply of new homes increased over the previous year by approximately 10%, and I believe that the last five years have seen some of the highest rates of property building for 30 years.

A number of colleagues raised home ownership. Crucially, after a pretty linear fall from the mid-2000s under Governments of all parties, home ownership has started to increase again for the first time in a number of years. The increase is incremental—the rate is up from 62.5% in 2016-17 to 64.3% in 2021-22—but it is a movement back in the direction of empowering people to own their own properties and obtain all the consequent benefits.

Dame Meg Hillier: The Minister talks about home ownership increasing, but that incremental increase can hardly be seen as a victory. His is the party that introduced right to buy to increase home ownership. I wonder what the percentage is for anyone under the age of 35. Will he acknowledge that the Government have totally failed that generation in this respect?

Lee Rowley: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that it is not enough, but the whole point of trying to build more properties and of using programmes such as the affordable housing programme to bridge, where that is necessary, into home ownership through rent and part ownership is to boost those numbers. My point is not that there are no challenges—I acknowledged such challenges at the very top of my speech. It is to try to insert balance, if only into the record: some progress has been made over the last 13 years. A substantial number of properties have been built over that time—for home ownership, for rent and in the affordable sector—and

most importantly, after a relatively clear-cut decline under Governments of all parties, the decline seems to have been arrested. There is a long way to go and there is absolutely the need for growth. I want everybody who wants to own their own home to have the opportunity to do so, but I hope that this is at least an indicator that we are moving, to an extent, in the right direction.

I have the greatest respect for the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), and would never dream of reading my phone when he is speaking. I was specifically texting—this is both the benefit and the tyranny of having mobile devices in a debate—about the point he had raised. I regret to tell him that I have been unable to get an answer in the 40 minutes since he spoke, but I will ask the Department to write to him. I will be honest with him: I do not know whether the Department has purview here, and I do not know any of the details of the problem that he highlighted. It is always a challenge for local communities when developers are unable to complete the properties that they have indicated they will. I know that causes issues. I have a similar one in the village of Tupton in North East Derbyshire, where the developer unfortunately went out of business and the site is now mothballed. North East Derbyshire District Council is working hard to try to move that issue on. I will endeavour to write to the hon. Member for Weaver Vale either way, and will see whether the Department can provide any advice or information about the point that he raised; I am grateful for his doing so.

The hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) raised a number of incredibly important and detailed points, to which I will ask the Department and the Minister responsible to respond in detail. Part of the answer to some of her questions will, I hope, be answered by the further details that come forward in the next stage of the affordable housing programme, but I will ask for a letter to be provided to the hon. Lady with more detail about the specific questions that she highlighted.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden made an extremely powerful intervention about the challenges of temporary accommodation—an issue that we all are aware of. We all want standards, quality and conditions to improve. As a former councillor in central London, albeit a number of years ago, I am under no illusions about some of the challenges of temporary accommodation. The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), has been clear that improvements are needed in this area and has indicated that further legislation will be forthcoming. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden for highlighting her concerns, and I hope the Department can make progress in the coming months and years.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) made a very important point about the challenges of access to labour, particularly in rural areas due to geography and topography and the like. I am sorry to hear about the issues his constituents are experiencing. While housing is a devolved matter, it is important, and I am grateful that he has put on record those issues and the work he is doing to address them. He will be aware that, at least from an England perspective, we are seeking to legislate as part of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill in order to offer councils the opportunity—which they do not have to

take up; some will choose to, some will not—to vary council tax for second homes. That will hopefully put an additional tool in the arsenal of local authorities to respond, in England, to the local challenges he has raised.

The spokesperson for the Opposition, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich, raised an important point about capacity in local planning authorities, which is an issue that the Housing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), and I are both involved in. Within planning, nationally significant infrastructure projects fall under my aegis. That is different from the debate we are having today, but there are very live conversations within the NSIPs and major infrastructure realms. I know from my colleague the Housing Minister that it is the same with regard to capacity in local planning authorities and within the appeals process, where a number of applications end up in their final stages.

The hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich raised a number of important points about green homes. We need to make progress on multiple different imperatives and initiatives. The part L uplift, which we brought in in the summer of 2021, constituted a 30% increase and improvement in standards. That is in place now and has been for almost a year. The transition period for the part L uplift ends shortly, meaning that all houses built from now on will be 30% more efficient than previously. That is a massive increase compared to a number of years ago. However, there is a trade-off here, and we are trying to work through the issues and make progress in all aspects.

The Labour party has spent much of this debate—reasonably, in my view—saying that we need more houses, and that they need to be affordable to own and rent. We agree, which is why we are trying to make progress in this area. We also need to make progress on the environmental agenda, but those things must be brought into balance. Every single time an hon. Member stands up in this place and says, “We just need this one thing added in”, we need to understand that there is cost involved. That is where we have to make considerations. The part L uplift is a great example: we are trying to make progress environmentally, while also trying to answer the question reasonably posed by hon. Members across this place as to how we increase housing supply in general. We hope we are striking the right balance.

Valerie Vaz: The Minister is doing a great job of expanding his speech. There is absolutely no cost to ensuring that there is an obligation for every new home built to have solar panels. Why does the Minister not look at that? My hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), Labour’s Front-Bench spokesperson, has said that all these new houses have to be retrofitted. Surely the Minister can consider what can be done with new houses in terms of the environmental factors?

Lee Rowley: I understand the point that the right hon. Lady is making, but there is a cost to mandating solar panels on new properties: the cost that will be paid for the initial transaction. If right hon. and hon. Members want to see supply boosted, we have to accept that we have to set a balance; we are trying to do that by saying both that it is important to make progress with regard

to the environmental imperatives that have been rightly highlighted and—to answer the exam question—to get the kind of supply that everybody in this debate wants to see.

I gently caution hon. Members not to be too prescriptive regarding the technology we use. Although solar panels will be appropriate in many instances—I would guess the majority of instances, as a non-expert and a non-surveyor—they will not be the solution to reducing the carbon footprint of every single new property built. We should all collectively accept that solar panels will not be a useful or effective way to spend money in that cohort—in situations where, for whatever reason, including the wrong aspect, the wrong part of the country or the wrong geography. We should seek not to impose a requirement in that regard but instead to say, “If you have that amount of money within the system to be able to spend on making that building greener, the Government will not be prescriptive that you have to do something that isn’t necessarily going to be effective, but we will encourage you to use that money to make it effective, be it in a different form of technology or doing it in a different way.”

Mr Dhesi: I thank the Minister for giving way and I think he will have heard the points about quality, size and environmental standards, and why it is important for there to be a focus on them; I appreciate his accepting that. Will he also confirm for us all, and for the record, when the revisions to the 2021 plan will be published?

Lee Rowley: We expect to be able to say more on the affordable housing point in the coming weeks ahead—in spring. I hope that answers his question. I will conclude—

Mike Amesbury *rose—*

Lee Rowley: I will first give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mike Amesbury: I will be brief. I recently addressed chief executives of housing associations from across the north, and the one big concern was around section 106 and the replacement—the infrastructure levy. I think that about 47% of affordable homes are built that way at the moment. What reassurances can the Minister give to the sector that that will be the case, and even better? The associations’ final ask was around section 21. When can we see the announcement on no-fault evictions—the pledge that has been made by the Government over and over again?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. On the final point, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has been clear in the other Chamber that we intend to bring forward more information about the rental sector relatively soon. I hope that answers his that question.

Obviously, the key underlying way in which we can answer the hon. Gentleman’s question about the infrastructure levy is to get the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill through. It depends what the other place does to that Bill. There are some quite substantial provisions, which I believe the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich went through in Committee a number of months ago; I had the opportunity to contribute to that

[*Lee Rowley*]

process very briefly. We will see what the other place does to that Bill. No doubt it will come back here. Once we get the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill through, we will be able to make progress on moving away from section 106 and towards an infrastructure levy, which I hope will capture more of what we seek to do.

To close, I thank the hon. Member for Slough again for requesting and instigating this debate. It is absolutely the case that everybody here feels very strongly—rightly—about the need to make further progress on housing in the years ahead, for precisely the reasons that have been articulated in this debate today. It is so important for our constituents, for transforming lives and for supporting the most vulnerable. We have all heard today about some of the challenges, but I hope that I have been able to rebalance things, at least to some extent, by highlighting the opportunities and some of the progress that has been made. Housing, affordable housing and home ownership are vital to our communities all across the country, from North East Derbyshire, where I am from, to the constituencies of right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to this debate today. We must make progress for precisely the reasons that have been articulated in this debate. I hope we can continue to do that in the months and years ahead.

3.50 pm

Mr Dhesi: I am extremely grateful, Mr Hollobone, for your excellent chairing of this passionate and powerful debate. The issue is critical for many of our constituents.

As passionate and powerful as the debate has been, I fear that the Minister must be feeling very lonely. Apart from his Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt), not a single member of his party has come to call for the urgent action that is required. I hope that the Minister will take the need to implement the eight NAO recommendations back to his Department. As the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), pointed out, they need to be looked at seriously and actioned. The Homes England grants for affordable homes are important and helpful, as we have found in Slough, but they are not sufficient to meet the scale of the problem.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi). She is a passionate advocate for her constituents and gave powerful examples of the planning problems for all in her constituency, and of the wider planning shambles. I hope that the Minister and his Department will look into that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) was previously a shadow Minister for local government and spoke with a great deal of experience and authority. He highlighted heartbreaking cases of children living in cramped accommodation and the problems of overcrowding, which we also face in Slough. I am extremely grateful to him for highlighting those issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), who is Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, spoke about the change in the definition of “affordability” and the multiplicity of markets. She also spoke about waiting times, which are so onerous for our constituents. She highlighted that, in her constituency, there is a nine-year wait for a three-bed property. Similarly, many of my constituents in Slough have to wait more than eight years to get a council property. That has an impact on children in particular.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) shone a light on the scale of the problem, the £1.6 billion cost to the taxpayer of failure and the fact that “temporary” currently means at least five years in her patch. It is a similar example to the ones highlighted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) and by Members from the west midlands. People are being placed outside of their borough, sometimes hundreds of miles away where they have no support network, and problems were raised around damp and mould.

My hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone)—I think he is my hon. Friend because we share a corridor and often have conversations on such matters—spoke about the complexities of the use of Airbnb and why we need a renewed national effort on housing. Otherwise, we all fear that we will go back to the bad old days of the past.

Given where we are at the moment and that targets will be missed by tens of thousands, I hope that the Minister will take back the message that we need to focus on this issue because it has a direct impact on the quality of life of our constituents, many of whom are living in rodent-infested, damp or mouldy properties. For them there seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel, and that is why the Government must focus on affordable housing. I thank you once again, Mr Hollobone. I hope that we will hear some good news this spring, as the Minister has promised.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Affordable Homes Programme.

Energy Suppliers and Consumer Rights

4 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered energy suppliers and consumer rights.

It is an honour to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Hollobone. I am pleased that we have time today—although I suspect that it might be cut off and restarted—to debate this vital topic and hear from the Government what they can do to assist our constituents. I acknowledge the Members who are here. I thank the Minister for reaching out to me before today in the spirit of co-operation, and I hope we can make productive use of the time.

If there is one thing that should always have been clear—if it is was not before this winter, it absolutely is now—it is that being an energy consumer is not optional. People who are off grid are hugely in the minority—the Minister will probably be relieved to know that I do not intend to talk about them and delays to fuel payments today. But for most people—millions of people—in the UK, the only way to heat their home, have light at night and keep their food fresh is to be a consumer via an energy company. We have learned in the past year that many energy companies are simply failing those consumers, and there is shockingly little by way of consumer rights in this area.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing this debate forward. In Northern Ireland, we have only two gas suppliers—there should be more. If there are more, there is competition, and if there is competition, prices come down. Does she agree that competition ensures that our constituents get better value?

Wendy Chamberlain: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. This is a 30-minute debate, so we will not get a speech from him. I agree that consumers need choice. Until this winter, many Members probably did not know the differences between the energy markets in Northern Ireland and other parts of the UK.

I came to this issue largely through casework. I saw a puzzling trend of constituents seemingly being overcharged and struggling to find redress, so we started asking people more widely about their experiences with their energy companies, and that really brought the cases rolling in. The issue is obviously not limited to my constituency of North East Fife; indeed, it would be strange if it was.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this incredibly important debate. It is certainly not just in her constituency; it is everywhere. I have a constituent called Jacqueline, who is a pensioner and fell into debt of £140 with OVO Energy, which sent round bailiffs. She broke down in tears and gave them a cheque there and then. Actually, the company was not reading her meter, and she is now £2,500 in debt. She is on a state pension, so she does not know what to do. That kind of callous behaviour by energy companies should not be tolerated. We must do something about it.

Wendy Chamberlain: That is not dissimilar to some of the cases I have seen in North East Fife. It seems to be that if we speak to a different person at the end of the phone at a different time, we get a completely different outcome. That is simply not acceptable.

Citizens Advice has said that there was a 230% increase in energy complaints to its Extra Help Unit this winter. For the first time, that has made energy the top advice issue. This is not confined to Oxford West and Abingdon or North East Fife; it is taking place throughout the UK.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): There is also a broader issue with the Government energy rebate during the winter period. People who live in park homes receive the energy rebate at the behest of the park home owner—they do not get a direct energy rebate from the energy company—but they are still potentially liable to the energy company. What would the hon. Lady suggest that the Minister do to ensure that park home residents receive the benefit of the energy rebates that the Government have made available, and to ensure that energy companies and park home owners are held accountable so that the energy rebates go to the residents of the park homes?

Wendy Chamberlain: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I, too, have park homes in my constituency, and that issue has come up. At the moment, we are completely dependent on the good will and good conduct of park home owners when it comes to ensuring that those living in park homes get their rebates. We need to consider the legislative agenda. The Energy Bill, which I will come to, had its First Reading in the House today and we should certainly be thinking about that.

What I am trying to say is that contacting an MP has sometimes become the only route for constituents who seek redress; as constituency MPs, we all know that. That is widespread. We can see that something in the system is failing, which is why I secured this debate. The Government have a role in consumer protection and the energy market. Just today, two new Bills have been introduced to the House: one, the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill, is explicitly about consumer rights, and the other is the Energy Bill. Both are about making our system fit for the future. Over the last year, we have seen that the Government have a role in ensuring that the energy market is working for consumers and that people can afford to pay their bills.

I would like to outline some of the problems that my constituents have been having before I return to the question of consumer rights. Overcharging has already been mentioned. A quarter of all the correspondence that I have received has been about that, which suggests that a huge number of people in the country—thousands, if not hundreds of thousands—must have the same issue. We know that energy bills have gone up and that there has been action to help people cope, but this issue is not about that. It is about energy companies billing families huge sums of money for energy that they have not used and about families doing their best to manage the cost of living—keeping costs down, putting food on the table and keeping afloat—and finding themselves facing debts of hundreds of pounds.

The overcharging comes in two forms, and both are deeply harmful. Imagine that you are a direct debit customer who pays bills monthly, accruing credit on

[Wendy Chamberlain]

your account. Those payments might have gone up when you renewed your contract last year, but that is fine because you planned for it. You budgeted. It has been difficult, but you made it work because that is what we all have to do. You have done your best to reduce your energy usage to make sure you did not end the year in debt. You have done everything that you reasonably can—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. A Division has been called in the House. The sitting will adjourn until 4.22 pm if there is one vote and 4.32 pm if there are two votes.

4.7 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

4.32 pm

On resuming—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The hon. Member has already had seven minutes, so the debate can last until 4.55 pm.

Wendy Chamberlain: I will move on quickly. I was outlining some of the issues with direct debits and giving the example of someone paying by direct debit whose payments may have gone up, but who was basically managing. But imagine if, despite that, their energy provider increased their direct debit payments, without their knowledge or any discussion about it, and they only found out because their carefully arranged budget was no longer in balance—they did everything right and were suddenly in debt anyway.

That is what is happening to people. I have seen a number of cases in North East Fife. One of my constituents had £900 in credit, yet their energy supplier is taking more. This surely is not right, and it is surely not the kind of practice we would accept. I urge the Minister to call this behaviour out and take proactive steps to prevent it from happening to other families and individuals.

The second form of overcharging is arguably even more egregious. This is where customers are receiving bills from energy companies for energy they have not used. Again, we are talking about hundreds of pounds being demanded, with threats of enforcement measures and huge amounts of distress as a result. I pay tribute to my casework team, who have been working these cases and providing fantastic support to my constituents. They try to understand what went wrong, but sometimes that is very difficult, as people are dealing with an opaque system and too often being told that their energy bill is final.

We have had some success in proving that bills are wrongly being charged, but even then energy companies do not always just cancel the bill. One of my constituents paid her £700 bill for fear of enforcement measures, and not many people have that sort of money just lying around. It is a stretch. Even now, the company has repaid only £500, insisting that £200 sits in the account as credit. That is £200 wrongly taken from my constituent that ought to be paid back.

As for the causes of these issues, some of it comes down to, arguably, predatory sales calls—lies are told and cooling-off periods are not respected. Some of it seems to be errors in the system, which when highlighted ought to be corrected, not defended. A lot of it seems to come down to smart meter issues. When they work, they are excellent, but when they do not, they are simply terrible. I fear the Government are trying to run before they can walk with the Energy Bill. They are pushing ahead with the roll-out and encouraging more use of smart appliances without getting the fundamentals right first.

Let us start with something basic: smart meters need to be connected to either the internet or a data signal. My constituency of North East Fife is rural. It is not as rural as some places, but rural enough that many properties are still without reliable internet access and there are mobile signal blackholes. Smart meters simply do not work in those conditions, but energy companies are too often refusing to listen. Another one of my constituents strongly argued against having her traditional meter replaced, knowing the signal issues at her property. The energy company ignored her and did it anyway. What a surprise: the smart meter does not work. Not only is she unable to monitor her usage, but her company, E.ON, is now charging her to reinstall the old-style meter.

Other constituents are able to have smart meters and, indeed, want them to help to keep on top of their bills, but even when the internet connection is good, smart meters still break. When they break, energy companies do not seem to want to replace them. One constituent's meter stopped working last October and, despite requesting one, has not had a replacement from SSE since. In the meantime, she cannot monitor her usage and her company cannot take readings. As a result, the company is taking larger and larger sums from her bank account based on estimates.

Another constituent—a vulnerable pensioner—has been waiting five months for a replacement gas meter. She was told that she could go outside and read the old-style meter in the interim, but she is disabled—she simply cannot do that. The list goes on, and the longest waits for replacements that I am aware of are well over a year—month after month of knowing that prices are going up and not knowing how much it is costing, and energy companies erring on the side of caution to their benefit, taking huge sums from customers. Of course, all those problems are compounded when we talk about vulnerable customers. I welcome the fact that Ofgem has a vulnerability strategy; but again, from the casework I have received, more clearly needs to be done.

I am aware of time and have not reached my main point yet, so I will be brief. Two things come through in the casework. First, billing is confusing for many people. Not only is it fair for customers to understand their bills; it is better for the market when consumers can compare bills and charges between different energy companies, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) alluded to. For that, I ask the Government to consult with stakeholders and disabled people to look at putting bills into a standard form. Secondly, priority service registers are not working effectively. More needs to be done to make it easy for vulnerable customers to identify themselves to energy companies, and companies ought to be proactive in looking out for those consumers. I am sure that all of us, as MPs, have encouraged constituents to get on those lists.

The thread that links all these issues together—and the reason why I am having to help constituents with energy issues, as I am sure everyone else here too—is simply the utterly abysmal customer service and the lack of clear consumer rights. Most consumer-facing industries have some form of consumer charter or code of practice. It exists in customer service and for aviation passengers, for water consumers under Ofwat and in broadcasting under Ofcom, but it does not exist when it comes to energy. What is there is incredibly basic and not helpful for individuals at all. Energy companies are regulated through Ofgem, and one of their licence conditions is that consumers must be treated fairly—that is it. That does not tell us anything. A Q&A document from Ofgem sets out some situations where a customer could be entitled to £30 compensation, such as when their smart meter breaks and is not investigated within five working days. Considering the sums of money being charged and the waiting times for replacements, that is a completely ridiculous method of enforcement and no incentive to companies to protect their consumers.

I am not criticising Ofgem. Indeed, I welcome last week's code of practice relating to pre-payment meters and its plans to consult on further standards. I am grateful that Ofgem spoke to me at short notice on Friday. The new system operator being set up under the Energy Bill will not help when it comes to consumer rights. Its goals are controlling cost, moving to net zero and ensuring our energy independence. These are all welcome, but leave a gaping hole when it comes to basic rights and service. Clearly, energy companies are falling far below any ordinary standard of service to consumers, and the need to keep adequate suppliers in the market means that Ofgem cannot threaten to take licences away from all of them, because bad practice is simply too widespread.

Does the Minister agree that energy consumers—that is, all of us—should have the same rights as people taking a plane or running their tap? Does she agree that the energy market can function properly only when our consumers know their rights and are empowered to enforce them? Does she agree that it is unconscionable for energy companies to be treating their consumers in the way they are today? I want every single issue from my constituency sorted out, and I hope the Minister will engage with that and the energy companies too, but we can be proactive and solve the root cause. I am asking the Government to consult on a new consumer rights charter for energy bills that will be communicated widely and where good companies can be accredited, and which will make our energy market work for consumers as well as for responsible suppliers. I look forward to hearing the Minister's remarks.

4.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): It is a pleasure to be here under your stewardship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) on securing this incredibly important debate. We are going to get together to have a further conversation, so I have listened with great interest to all her comments.

I take the role of Minister for energy consumers and affordability incredibly seriously. At least once a day I comment on the fact that affordability is at the heart

of all that we do. It is vital to bring down energy bills and ensure that consumers are protected. One of my key drivers is to ensure that the vulnerable are not made more vulnerable. I regularly meet the chief executive of market regulator Ofgem. I spoke to vulnerable consumers at a summit yesterday, and continue to engage with lots of stakeholders, including Citizens Advice, and other suppliers.

The Government have made it clear to Ofgem that we expect it to be robustly enforcing the rules aimed at ensuring that suppliers treat their customers fairly. Suppliers should continually strive to adopt and embed a customer-centric culture. That relates to how suppliers behave, provide information and carry out customer service processes. Ofgem's guaranteed standards of performance exist to ensure that suppliers provide automatic compensation when domestic customers' switches are delayed, when customers are erroneously switched, when issuance of the final bill is delayed, when there are missed or late appointments, or if a supplier does not send an engineer who has the skills and experience to carry out the planned work.

If a customer thinks their meter is not working properly, the supplier should agree a timescale with the customer to complete the work. If a supplier does not do what it said it would, it should give the customers £30 compensation, as the hon. Member mentioned. For prepayment meter faults, if the consumer cannot get any electricity or gas, and they think the meter is faulty, they should contact the supplier. The supplier should come round and repair or replace it within three hours, or four hours on a weekend or bank holiday.

If the consumer thinks their meter is faulty but the power supply is still working, they should still contact their supplier, and the supplier should arrange a future appointment within three or four hours. If a supplier does not do what it said it would, it should give the customer £30 compensation. Suppliers must pay £30 compensation to customers within 10 days of breaching an individual guaranteed standard. If it fails to pay the customer in time, it must pay an additional £30. I listened closely to what the hon. Member said, and I know we will have further discussions about the suitability of this arrangement.

Suppliers are required to submit complaints data to Ofgem on a monthly and quarterly basis. Suppliers also publish domestic complaints data on their websites, including the top five reasons for complaints, and the measures they are taking to improve how they handle customer complaints. If the customer remains unhappy with the outcome of their complaint, they can approach the energy ombudsman. Ombudsman Services is an independent body that provides dispute resolution, and it is free for consumers. Ombudsman Services can investigate and, where appropriate, oblige the supplier to rectify the situation.

One area that needs to be improved relates to prepayment meters. We all heard about the incredibly appalling practices that occurred with the forced fitting of prepayment meters. The Government have made their strong feelings clear on the issue. I am glad that suppliers have now signed up to a more robust set of standards. The new code of practice will help, but we still need to ensure that we work together to deliver an energy market that works for everyone.

[Amanda Solloway]

Ofgem has acted to improve protection for vulnerable households, increased scrutiny of supplier practices and introduced redress where meters were wrongfully installed. We have been crystal clear that fitting a prepayment meter by force for any customer must be an absolute last resort, after all other options have been completely exhausted. The Government will monitor the behaviour of suppliers very closely and will not hesitate to intervene if necessary.

On the issue of understanding energy bills, Ofgem has produced a short video and short written guides for households. Suppliers are required to maintain a telephone support line and to provide an explanation of the customer's bill in plain and intelligible language. Again, I look forward to meeting the hon. Member to discuss that further and to discuss whether there are more things that we should and could be doing. There are resources such as Citizens Advice's big energy saving network, which is a network of trained advisers who help people to understand energy use in the home and how to get the support that they are entitled to.

I thank the hon. Member for North East Fife for securing the debate. I can reassure her and parliamentary colleagues that the Government expect energy suppliers to provide good customer service and to look after their vulnerable consumers. The Secretary of State and I have made it clear that that is a top priority for Government. As I mentioned, I meet regularly with Ofgem and key stakeholders, such as Citizens Advice and the ombudsman, to discuss the experiences of consumers and how they can be improved. When suppliers are providing poor customer service, they should expect customers to switch to a better supplier. Although the market for switching for a better price is only just restarting after the gas price crisis, some customers have continued to switch to find better customer service. I look forward to meeting with the hon. Lady to discuss these matters further.

Question put and agreed to.

Motorways: Litter

4.47 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now move on to a rubbish debate—about litter on motorways. I call Sir Mike Penning to move the motion.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered litter on motorways.

On a very serious subject, hopefully we can also have some calming measures, if you know what I mean, Mr Hollobone. Other colleagues have indicated to me that they would join the debate this afternoon, so I wonder whether you could bear with them, Mr Hollobone, if some of them arrive a little later.

My constituency is boundaried by the M1, M25 and A41. The state of the rubbish on those motorways is an embarrassment to me as the constituency's MP, and as an MP in general. I freely admit that the rubbish has probably been thrown out of the windows of cars—by passengers as well as drivers. Some of it comes off the back of refuse lorries that, inappropriately, do not have the correct tarpaulins to stop that happening.

Whatever the reason, the rubbish will start to disappear in the next few weeks. It is not going anywhere—it is just that the grass and weeds are growing, and they will cover it up. It is still not only a hindrance but a danger to our wildlife. Some of the areas where the motorways go are areas of outstanding natural beauty, on which wildlife very much rely. In my spare time, I love bird watching. It frightens me to look at some of the nests—especially at the end of the seasons, when we start clipping our hedgerows and other such things—and see what the birds think is safe to put into their nests.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I thank the right hon. Member for securing this important debate. Anyone who knows me will know that littering is my biggest bugbear; it is infuriating. A key concern that highways workers have relayed to me is the health and safety risk that litter poses to them when they have to clean it up. Does he agree that the issue is not given enough consideration?

Sir Mike Penning: I think not only that it is not given enough consideration, but that it is a national disgrace. I specifically picked on motorways because of the legal responsibility Highways England, the Highways Agency or whatever it wants to call itself today—it has renamed itself several times since I was the Roads Minister. I do not know why it has spent so many thousands of pounds of taxpayers' money renaming itself. If the brand is decent, it should not be renamed. If the brand is bad, it should be renamed, and that seems to be exactly what Highways England or the Highways Agency—Highways something—has been doing. It has a legal responsibility for its network, which includes not just motorways but some A roads.

We should have better enforcement and use the technology that we have. If we can prosecute people for going two or three miles per hour over the speed limit—I am all for that; I was a Transport Minister—we can use the same cameras to prosecute people who throw litter. I am sure that, like me, colleagues have seen footage of

people on the motorway driving down the road—there is the car, there is the numberplate, there is the face, there is the phone—and exactly the same technology can be used for people chucking litter out of the car.

Penalties almost certainly need to be stronger. Perhaps we should do something not dissimilar to what I did when I was the Minister and we brought in the driver awareness course. Fines and points were not working, but the evidence showed that drivers actually drive better and slower after they have done such a course.

At the end of the day, we have to do two things. We have to educate people through courses such as the driver awareness course, and we have to make sure the person or organisation responsible for these highways takes action. I picked the motorways because it is not like in our constituencies, where it could be a borough council, a district council, a county council or a unitary authority; there is a single body legally responsible for motorways and some A roads under section 89 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. We have got to the ridiculous stage where individuals—I will talk about John Read and the Clean Up Britain campaign—are almost certain to use section 91 of the Act to take National Highways to court. We have the right under the Act to say, “You are not doing what you are supposed to be doing, which is to clear up the mess on our highways.”

When I applied for this debate, I was thrilled by not only by the excellent paper produced by the House of Commons Library, but by John Read of Clean Up Britain, Policy Exchange and the RAC Foundation. I also thank the *Sunday Express* for helping to highlight this issue last weekend. They have all come together to say, “What can we do to stop this blight, predominantly on the English countryside, getting worse and worse?”

As I said earlier, the litter will soon start to be covered over as the plants grow, but in the autumn, when the frost comes, there it will all be. What surprised me enormously was some of the commentary coming from National Highways. It produced a lengthy paper saying that it regularly checks the highways, and that more than 60% do not have any rubbish on them. All I can say is that they should have gone to Specsavers, or other places that are available, to check their eyesight when they drive back and forth to work on our highways. Litter is a danger not only to our wildlife—I have seen aluminium tins on the side of the road that have been there for so many years that they are starting to degrade, and plastic does not degrade in the same way—but to the staff clearing it up, as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) said. There have to be road closures and it has to be done safely.

Interestingly, other countries seem to have solved this problem quite well. Any of us who go on holiday this summer to Germany, France or Spain will see that their highways are not covered in trash. Many people from this country will go to Florida, which has large five or six-lane roads. The hedges and grass are not covered in trash, and any litter is certainly not all chopped up when the grasscutters come along and it has not been picked up.

We have to ask ourselves why. Is it a cultural thing, or is it because the organisation that is legally responsible for clearing up rubbish is doing so? Frankly, if someone has broken the law and they get a community project, I cannot think of a better way of paying back into the

community than being in a team that goes out and safely clears the rubbish from the sides of our roads. When I was in the Minister's position, I was told that that was not possible because it was not safe. I used to be the Health and Safety Minister as well, at a different time, and it could be made safe. It is safe for workers to do it, and some of the stuff they have to pick up is truly horrible. We will not go into that in this debate, but Members can imagine what gets thrown out of car windows.

The question has to be, why is National Highways not taking this issue seriously? The organisation cannot be taking it seriously, because it has given contractors contracts but is not monitoring them. Following a freedom of information request to Mr John Read, National Highways came back and said:

“We don't undertake audits of our contractors' work for litter clearance.”

How do they know that 60% of the roads are clear if they are not monitoring their own contracts? It baffles me.

Under the Secretary of State, the Department for Transport has introduced key performance indicators for National Highways, but litter is not one of them; it is just part of something else and seen as not that important. I say to the Minister that it is important. How can we have a key performance indicator for the contract issued to National Highways by the Secretary of State that does not take into consideration the legal responsibility it has to the public? This is public money being spent on behalf of the public through the Secretary of State.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Many of my constituents express many of the concerns that he has already outlined. On the point about legal responsibilities and KPIs, we also have an issue that is applicable not just to motorways, but to A roads. In my constituency, we have the A2 and the A20, where there is general confusion about who is legally responsible for cleaning the litter from the hard shoulder and the verges. Transport for London often says that it is the local council's responsibility, and local councils often dispute that, because they are obviously Transport for London roads.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that alongside strengthening the KPIs, we also need to have legal clarity about who is responsible for litter on motorways and our A roads? I echo his enthusiasm for encouraging community volunteer litter pickers who want to go out and help, but who are told no because of health and safety.

Sir Mike Penning: My hon. Friend has made several points that I completely agree with. As I said earlier, National Highways is responsible not only for motorways; it also has some A roads in my own part of the world. What was the M10 is now the A414, but it still has responsibility for that road. I do not think the organisation knows that, because it has not been anywhere the road since the day it ceased to be a motorway. I wrote to the Secretary of State and what I think was then known as Highways England, asking whether there was any chance that it could come along and pick up some of the signage that is lying on the roadsides, getting rusty and acting as a blight on animals and on the safety of someone who has pulled off the side of a road in an emergency. The signage is still there today.

[Sir Mike Penning]

The point that I think my hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French) is making about who is responsible is actually quite crucial. I mean, when I was the Roads Minister, I did not realise that with the M10—I live right next to the M10, although I know it is now the A414—the Highways Agency had kept responsibility for it and several other A roads. So that could be resolved very simply by the Minister dropping our hon. Friend a line to say that “the legal responsibility for the A2 lies with X”. I am sure that the Minister could get his officials to do that; that is what I might have done if I was the Minister. But who knows?

Regarding the other point that my hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup made, there are lots of volunteers out there today, going out and picking litter up; I have some in my own constituency and they do a fantastic job. There is that issue and there is actually the payback issue. People who are blighting my community in myriad different ways and who may get a community order should have to be supervised out there to clean the roads.

If anyone goes to Florida, they will drive down wonderful, clean roads. One of the reasons is that Florida actually uses people who are incarcerated to go and clear the roads. They are not dangerous criminals, but they are people in for short-term sentences. Of course they are not chained up or anything like that, but if they scarper—the sort of language that my grandmother would have used—they will eventually be found and at the end of the day they would not have any parole. They are not going to be attacked if they scarper, and they are already starting the payback. In our open prisons, why could we not have that today in parts of the country? It would be slightly difficult with some of the open prisons in, say, Norfolk, because there are no motorways in Norfolk. Payback and should mean payback.

The Minister might say to me, “Well, actually, the contracts are set in stone over a period of time with National Highways and the KPI is set.” But if he looks carefully at the legislation, he will see that the Secretary of State has the powers at any time to deviate the contract, so the KPIs could be changed.

I think this is an issue of national importance. We can talk about it being rubbish, or trash, but we have some of the most beautiful countryside in the world, in my opinion. We should cherish it. There are people demonstrating out there, yesterday and today, because they passionately believe—I do not agree with their motives and how they are trying to do it, but I do agree that we have to protect our countryside.

Over the years, we have put lots of roads right the way through some of our countryside, and that countryside is being blighted, day in and day out. Frankly, looking at the correspondence, particularly from National Highways—I am sorry, Minister, but I do not think they get it. They just talk to me. Among the briefings, they are talking about the responsibility of local authorities. Well, no local authority in the country has responsibility for clearing up the motorways. They—National Highways—have it. The title of this debate was specific, so as not to have that debate about local government. The narrative here is purely about National Highways.

There are lots of things that are probably not fully in the Minister’s bailiwick, and I share his frustration with some of that, because I used to sit in that chair and think, “I’d love to have done that,” and, “I would love to do this.” But if we have the will, we have the way. Fines need to be increased. If people want to throw stuff out of car windows—some of it the most abhorrent products that we do not particularly want to discuss today—they should be penalised for it.

Similarly, however, if an organisation has the legal responsibility in law, set by this place, that it is their job to clear up that mess—go and give them some powers if we want to use the cameras in a way in which we can actually enforce the issue. They cannot cop out of this; it is actually in statute whose responsibility it is. The KPI can be changed, so that the regulator can step in and actually say, “You’re not fulfilling your contracts,” because if that does not happen, we will have individual members of the public taking this organisation—National Highways, which is funded by the British taxpayer—to court for a breach of the Act. To me, that is a crying shame, but if it happens I will fully support that commitment to go to the magistrates courts.

5.4 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing this debate. I agree with almost everything he said.

Litter is something I have repeatedly raised concerns about with National Highways and, previously, Highways England. It is unacceptable for my office to have to repeatedly raise the issues of litter, lack of effective maintenance and general poor standards of work with National Highways. I am pleased that the Transport Committee, which I am a member of, recently wrote to Nick Harris, chief executive of National Highways, about some of these issues, particularly the nearly 40% of the strategic road network that either has widespread litter or is heavily affected by litter.

Many of my constituents in Stoke-on-Trent South frequently raise concerns with me about the disgraceful levels of litter and the bad impression that people get when visiting or travelling through our area on the strategic road network. One of my constituents said to me recently when I was out in the community that one of their relatives had visited from overseas and was completely shocked to see the standard of our highways and the scale of litter accumulating at the side of the road. As my right hon. Friend said, overseas we do not see the same scale of littering at the side of the highway.

Staffordshire is at the heart of the UK, with several key routes passing through it. We have seen major problems with litter and poor maintenance on this road network, and there are concerns with our motorway network, particularly on the M6 and around its junctions. The issue is not reserved to the motorway network. There are also major concerns about trunk roads, which are also under the auspices of National Highways. The A50 and A500 cut right through the middle of Stoke-on-Trent, and that has a significant impact on the surrounding communities. While these routes provide important strategic connectivity, they also cause many problems, including air pollution and litter.

The problems with litter have at times reached epic proportions, and I am extremely concerned about some of the wider maintenance standards, such as with vegetation management. The severe lack of grass cutting by National Highways has resulted in roundabouts and verges in the centre of Longton and Meir being totally neglected. Given that these roads cut through predominantly urban areas, standards of maintenance need to be different from those used in more sparsely populated areas. National Highways currently conducts only an annual cut, meaning verges become totally overgrown and completely filled with litter.

The lack of effective vegetation management has resulted in significant litter build-ups gathering in the overgrowth and attracting vermin. Following our calls, Stoke-on-Trent City Council has thankfully stepped in to cut some of these areas, including the most sensitive locations in town centres, which are still the responsibility of National Highways, but this really should not be happening. National Highways should take proper responsibility for the land that it owns.

Margaret Ferrier: On the point of vermin, littered food attracts wild animals such as mice, rats and foxes. Drawn so close to vehicles moving at speed, these animals have a higher risk of being killed. Many of them carry germs and disease, and it is not a nice job to have to clean up roadkill. Does the hon. Member share my concerns about the increased risk of animal deaths resulting from litter?

Jack Brereton: I agree that those are very serious concerns. Health and safety concerns were mentioned earlier regarding the impacts of the litter and the disease that could be carried by rats and other animals. That is a serious concern.

One of the things we have seen in our area because of the lack of effective maintenance is anti-social behaviour, with resultant massive build-ups of litter, including alcohol bottles and drug paraphernalia on National Highways land. As regards health and safety and the operatives who will have to remove some of that drug paraphernalia, that is extremely concerning. If there are syringes and things like that there, they will have to wear specialist safety equipment. I recognise that some projects have been undertaken to address some of the vegetation management in our area, but we need a far more comprehensive and proactive routine maintenance approach—and to a much higher standard than some of what we have experienced so far.

The situation is overly complicated, with differing responsibilities for different roads, and we heard earlier about some of the confusions in Bexley. That is repeated in a number of places around the country. Motorways are entirely the responsibility of National Highways. However, it is suggested that National Highways takes responsibility for litter collection on only some of its major A roads, even though the land is in its ownership. On many National Highways A roads, local authorities have to clear litter, so we see different standards across the country.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead, I commend many of the volunteers—particularly those in Stoke-on-Trent South, who have been doing an incredible job across the constituency in addressing some of the litter issues. However, they

simply cannot do that on many highway locations, where safety is a serious concern and where we need National Highways or others to remove some of the litter.

National Highways has now started to form litter partnerships with local authorities, which is a positive step forward. Those partnerships are important given that it would be totally unsafe—impossible, in many cases—to undertake litter collections on parts of the National Highways network without road closures. There needs to be effective co-ordination for litter picking to take place when those roads are closed for wider maintenance.

Sir Mike Penning: On the point about collaboration with local authorities, the financial burden should not fall on local authorities for something that is the legal responsibility of a different organisation. If that happens, it will spread around the country. That would be wrong, because it is not the financial burden of the local authority.

Jack Brereton: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend. We see lots of pressures on things such as social care and everything else that local authorities have to deal with, so it is totally unacceptable that, in addition, they have to routinely clear up litter on many of those roads.

As I mentioned earlier, Stoke-on-Trent City Council has to cut the grass on many of the areas for which National Highways should take responsibility. Yet because its policy is for one annual cut, which is totally insufficient and results in massive build-ups of litter, we do not see the standard of service we need, and the financial impact for local authorities that have to deal with that is significant. In many cases, it just does not happen at all and we see the continued build-up of vast quantities of litter on much of the highway network.

I hope these partnerships, alongside other measures being undertaken by National Highways, result in a step change in the standards we need to see and in dramatic improvements, which have to happen, on what we have experienced previously. Forty per cent. is far too much of a blight on the network. Indeed, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead said, there is far more than that and it is potentially an underestimate of the scale of the challenge. It is vitally important for people in Stoke-on-Trent, those visiting and the wider environment that we have an effective approach to maintenance and litter control on the strategic network. I thank my right hon. Friend for the debate. It is about an important matter, and I hope the Minister will address all the issues.

5.14 pm

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): First, I apologise to you, Mr Hollobone, for not giving advance notice of my intention to speak in the debate. I want to make a fairly short contribution. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing the debate and I apologise also to him for not being here for the very beginning of his speech, which I am sure was as outstanding as the latter part.

This is a genuinely serious issue. I cover the M25 and have the A2 in my constituency; nearby are the A20 and M20. There is no doubt that this is a growing problem;

[Gareth Johnson]

it is a worsening situation, which is very challenging to deal with. I am, frankly, sick to death of driving down the A2 and seeing this sea of litter along the side, particularly at junctions. The Darenth interchange is in my constituency, which is in an appalling state.

I am blessed in my constituency to have a large number of litter picker-type groups, which have done a fantastic job assisting the council and complementing the work that it does in picking up litter. The volunteer groups go out and collect litter. Some have been clearing litter from the junctions, but there is clearly a danger there—a significant risk.

When they contact National Highways, they are told not to go to the junctions—“Don’t go there; we advise against that because of the obvious dangers.” Some have been to those junctions and have taken away bags of rubbish, but there are all sorts of hazardous issues in doing that, not just traffic. So we are very reliant on National Highways taking the lead on this growing problem. It needs to show the lead. We are very reliant on it to clear up the litter.

Of course, National Highways do not drop the litter. People drop the litter, and I agree that that is the responsibility of those ignorant people who are throwing rubbish out of the window when they are driving along. I accept that sometimes it can be inadvertent, or negligent, but sometimes it is deliberate. Items are being thrown out of car windows and lorry windows, ensuring that the sides of the roads are an eyesore that we are all, unfortunately, getting used to seeing.

Margaret Ferrier: Does the hon. Member think that more frequent signage reminding motorists not to litter and the potential consequences of a fixed penalty notice would make any material difference to the levels of littering seen on the motorways? Would that be a worthwhile investment?

Gareth Johnson: I agree with the hon. Lady that that would make responsible people more aware of the issue, and they would act even more in a responsible manner. However, I do not feel it would have much of an impact on the ignorant people I spoke about earlier, who do not give a damn, frankly, about anybody else. It is someone else’s problem—“I am going to throw this rubbish out of the window and someone else is going to have to deal with it.” Unfortunately, those people are not going to change because of a sign.

The hon. Lady is absolutely right on the issue of fines. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead touched on this point in his speech. We now have camera technology that can give motorists fines for blocking box junctions, going through red traffic lights, speeding and so on. My hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French) will know about the ultra-low emission zone cameras, as will the Minister, although we will leave that issue to one side at the moment.

The technology is able to pick up motorists doing almost anything it seems, apart from when they litter. I would certainly welcome a change in policy so that we use the camera technology that already exists to target those vehicles responsible for rubbish being deliberately thrown on to our motorway verges and to issue fixed penalty notices to the registered keeper of those vehicles.

That would have some impact on the blight that is hitting our country, alongside our motorways, up and down the country. I would like to see more of that happening.

This is a big and growing problem in my constituency, and not just there, but around the whole of the country. It is not just Dartford or Hemel Hempstead or Bexley or Stoke-on-Trent that suffers; it is the whole country. We are seeing a lackadaisical attitude from National Highways, which should be taking the lead and upping its game. The current situation is not tenable.

5.19 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to work under your chairpersonship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing this debate. I know he has raised this important issue many times in the past and it is an issue to which he is fully committed. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions.

Motorways provide vital links between towns and cities across the country. They contribute tens of billions to our economy by helping to make sure our shelves are stocked with food, medical supplies and everything else that we need. However, litter on these roads is a serious issue that affects all those who use them, as well as the wider environment.

Littered motorways pose a risk to safety. Objects can obstruct drivers’ views or cause problems with grip, if caught between a wheel and the road. Furthermore, the impact of litter discarded on motorways stretches far beyond the roads themselves. It adds to pollution, which, as we have all seen, has a devastating impact on wildlife, especially in our oceans, seas and rivers. We have all seen shocking images of rubbish piled up on and around our motorways. There has been a failure to properly deal with it.

For instance, in 2020, a Channel 4 report showed huge piles of rubbish covering areas around the M25. Taxpayers’ money has been handed out to private firms to keep our motorways clear of litter, but incidents like this raise important questions that need answering. Although the vast majority of drivers do the right thing and dispose of their rubbish properly, a small minority cause problems.

Resources for picking up litter are important. However, preventing litter from being dropped in the first place is a lasting solution. I am aware of calls for greater penalties and better enforcement of anti-littering laws to incentivise drivers not to throw litter out of their car windows. Can the Minister confirm, either in his speech or in writing, the number of fines handed out for motorway littering? What steps has he taken to ensure that all those who litter are held accountable?

Sir Mike Penning: I thank the hon. Lady for her gracious comments. Sadly, National Highways does not have powers to issue fines, unlike local authorities. Almost certainly, enforcement through the use of cameras must be done by the Department for Transport unless we are going to change the statute, which is a separate subject for another day. It does not have the power to issue fines. I wish it did; on the other hand, perhaps not.

Gill Furniss: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that.

National Highways reports directly to the Department for Transport, so it falls to the Minister to hold it to account and ensure that it is upholding its statutory duties. What discussions has he had with National Highways about littering? Does he believe that all contracts handed out to private companies to keep our motorways free of litter are offering taxpayers good value for money? What steps is he willing to take if the problems do not get resolved?

As well as holding National Highways to account, there are a range of wider measures that the Government could introduce to tackle littering, but, as we see all too often, they are dragging their feet. Deposit returns for drinks containers have been shown to cut down littering, including on motorways, but that will not be launched until 2025, despite widespread public support for an earlier introduction.

I am concerned that such delays mean that the Government target to eliminate all avoidable plastic waste by 2042 is already behind schedule. I conclude by once again commending the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead for securing this debate. Littering is a serious problem, which blights all our communities. It must be given the attention necessary to create a cleaner and safer environment for everyone who uses our motorways and highways.

5.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): It is an absolute pleasure, as ever, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) for bringing this debate to Westminster Hall. I believe he served as Roads Minister for almost two and a half years; I hope to have even a fraction of that time in the role and to do as much work as he did in this area at the start of the coalition Government. I also thank the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), my hon. Friends the Members for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French), for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) and for Dartford (Gareth Johnson), and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss).

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead raised many issues that I will approach head on through my response on behalf of the Government. The Government's vision is of a road network free of litter. We believe that there is a lot more that we can do to keep the strategic road network, which includes England's motorways, clear of litter. Litter is not only an eyesore, as hon. Members on both sides have mentioned, but environmentally damaging in numerous ways. It can risk the lives of the people who need to collect it as well as those of people on the road network itself.

The Government's litter strategy for England is owned by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and it sets out the aim to deliver a substantial reduction, across Government, in litter and littering within a generation. The litter strategy brings together communities, businesses, charities and schools, to bring about real change by focusing on the following key themes: education and awareness, improving enforcement, and better cleaning and access to bins. Those three

themes have been picked up by hon. Members across the House in this debate. Influencing public behaviour and discouraging littering from occurring in the first instance is important in delivering lasting improvements. We will work across Government and with anti-littering organisations to help achieve that vision.

The responsibility of National Highways was a key theme of my right hon. Friend's speech, and the responsibility for clearing litter and sweeping carriageways is indeed governed by the Environmental Protection Act 1990. National Highways is responsible for litter collection on motorways and on some trunk roads. I will write to my hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup about the A2 and A20; the area is around the M25 and what is before and after it, but I will get the specific maps to him.

Relevant district and local authorities manage litter collection on roads in the rest of England. National Highways does have its own litter strategy, which aligns with wider Government strategy and has similar themes. Within that strategy, National Highways has committed to keeping the strategic road network predominantly free from litter without compromising safety, and delivering that affordably. National Highways staff undertake regular road inspections along the network to identify litter, detritus and safety hazards and they arrange for appropriate action as soon as possible, in line with the DEFRA code of practice on litter and refuse. Obviously, their main priority is to maintain road safety on the network.

Sir Mike Penning: As a former Roads Minister, I understand how it is when an arm's length agency is sending notes saying, "This is what we do." But it is completely different out there in the real world. I am sorry, but if National Highways is out there checking regularly, it really needs to get its eyes tested. The situation is appalling. Year after year, the same places are involved—particularly the junctions. In my part of the world, the M25/A41 junction is literally piled high year after year, and I have never seen it cleared. The Minister has a responsibility to the taxpayer to turn around and say, "This isn't working."

Mr Holden: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising that point. Most weeks, I drive up the A1 and M1 to my North West Durham constituency, so I know exactly the issues he is raising. I will write to him about the specific issues around the roads in his constituency.

I want to go into a few more details, but we all want the issue to be addressed. Obviously, safety is paramount when clearing litter from the network. The roads are often fast running a lot of the time, with high volumes of traffic. Litter picking usually requires traffic management and sometimes overnight working as well. Relevant organisations across Government work closely with other litter clearing organisations to improve the operational effectiveness of clearing wherever possible.

National Highways has previously utilised the Ministry of Justice's community payback project scheme to assist with those clearances. Offenders have been involved in removing graffiti and rubbish at service stations as well. As my right hon. Friend will know, the Government still own a significant number of service stations on the national highway network. The scheme was suspended during the covid pandemic; I undertake to write to him about that and about what we are doing to push National

[Mr Holden]

Highways to make more use of it going forwards. Due to safety considerations, the opportunities for using offenders can be limited.

More broadly, the simple fact is that if litter was not dropped in the first place it would not need to be picked up; that is why influencing behaviours is an essential component of tackling the issue. My hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent South and for Dartford made that point as well. To answer one of the questions posed by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough, I had a meeting with the chief executive of National Highways today and raised the issue of littering. In fairness to my officials, I have meetings every couple of weeks with the National Highways chief exec, and this was one issue that was raised today.

I have also spoken with National Highways about a broader awareness campaign. I think it was my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford who made the important point that there is aggressive littering and more passive littering, and it is particularly important that we do all we can to make people aware of the impact littering has on not only the environment but everyone's enjoyment of travelling across the country and our rural environment. There is a campaign currently in the offing to tackle this, because National Highways is aware of how much of an issue it has become.

National Highways uses research and evidence to inform anti-littering interventions, such as car and lorry-height bins, which people may have seen as they leave motorway service stations; anti-littering posters; and signs to encourage positive littering behaviours. I will write to hon. Members who have attended today's debate about what more National Highways is doing in that space. Campaigns and messages such as "Don't Drop Litter, Bin It" and "Keep It, Bin It" have been shown on electric message boards across the National Highways network, and there have been digital display sites at traffic hubs and motorway service stations across England. Feedback from road users has shown that that type of messaging can make a difference in reducing the amount of littering on certain parts of the network, and I want National Highways to do more of it.

We are continuously looking for other ways to influence littering behaviour, and we work with anti-littering charities, such as Keep Britain Tidy, and use their research to develop other interventions. National Highways supports the annual Great British Spring Clean, which raises awareness of roadside litter and encourages people to dispose of their litter correctly or to take it home. This year's campaign was the seventh year that National Highways has been involved, and over the previous six campaigns it has collected over 60,000 binbags full of litter across the road network. National Highways also engages the commercial transport sector via its recently established professional driver experience panel, and littering behaviour campaigns throughout 2022 were aimed at road user groups who admit to having a propensity to litter, which includes commercial vehicle drivers.

Road users are also encouraged to report any instances of littering on the network to National Highways. There is also guidance available on many local authority websites, as well as other applications, to assist members of the public in reporting litter. All those interventions work towards engaging the public and preventing littering on

the network in the first place, but this is a societal issue that does not just affect the wider road network. It will take work across wider Government and anti-littering organisations to continue to drive change in how littering affects areas.

Sir Mike Penning: I get the feeling that Minister is coming to a conclusion. All that work is taking place for the future, but unless we address the KSI issue, and unless there is some penalty for the agency not doing what it is required to do, the regulator cannot intervene, because fulfilling its legal requirements is not a KSI for the agency.

Mr Holden: I will come directly to the point about the KSI later. I have made a note of my right hon. Friend's comments.

The debate has focused on litter on the motorways, but I must briefly highlight the work National Highways does with local authorities to combat litter on the roads. National Highways works closely with local authorities to resolve issues as far as is practicable. I will go into a bit more detail momentarily, but there is some good work with local authorities across the country, and the issue requires that interaction between National Highways and local authorities. To continuously improve collaboration and partnership working with local authorities, National Highways shares its maintenance and traffic management plans to allow litter collection to be carried out safely and simultaneously with maintenance, to help bring efficiencies to the process. NH provides a single point of contact to facilitate the co-ordination of litter clearance and provides an induction programme for local authority staff, which includes guidance on how to work with NH and signpost to further information and best practice. The Department expects NH to work with and support local authorities as much as possible to tackle litter on the wider strategic road network, and also at junctions, as litter does not stop at authority or National Highways boundaries.

Performance monitoring is one of the key drivers of the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead. The importance of litter to the Department and National Highways is highlighted by the fact that it is one of the performance indicators against which National Highways is monitored. The percentage of the strategic road network where litter is graded B or above under the DEFRA litter code of practice is measured. Grade B is defined as a network that is predominantly free from litter and refuse, apart from some small items. National Highways has committed to reporting against that metric annually. However, performance is monitored more regularly by the independent Highways Monitor, at the Office of Rail and Road. I will ask National Highways to write to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South about its policy regarding his council.

Sir Mike Penning *rose*—

Mr Holden: If my right hon. Friend will allow to continue for another minute or so, he can jump in, if he needs to, on the KSI.

The Highways Monitor provides monthly advice to the Department on the performance of National Highways across all its performance metrics, and there is continuous dialogue between the three parties on opportunities for improvement.

Jack Brereton: I want to ask the Minister about the accuracy of that data. As we heard earlier, we have serious issues with grass and other vegetation disguising litter. Once it is cut, it reveals huge amounts of litter. I therefore question the accuracy of the data, and I wonder what the Minister's view is on that.

Mr Holden: As I said, I will write to my hon. Friend about that, because it is an important point. If there is not proper monitoring, we cannot know what is going on. I want to get to the bottom of policies on grass cutting and other things.

National Highways and the Highways Monitor will report litter performance to the public in their annual reports, providing increased transparency. That happened only in road investment strategy 2. That is the era we are in now—between 2020 and 2025.

As hon. Members know, in 2021-22 National Highways reported that 61% of the network was graded A, which is no litter, or B, which is a small amount of litter. That means that a large proportion of the national highways—39%—has a significant amount. Although that is an improvement on 2020-21, which was about 49%, there is clearly still a lot of work to do. I do not underestimate that. Those grades are alongside DEFRA's litter code of practice. The data for 2022-23 will be published this summer, so I ask hon. Members to keep an eye out for that.

Sir Mike Penning: I think what the Minister is saying to me is that, since I was the Minister, the regulator has not been allowed to look at the individual performance indicator, which is part of the KSI—it can look only at the KSI. Is he saying that the regulator can now look at the performance indicator on its own, or is it still allowed to look only at the KSI? If it is allowed to look only at the KSI, litter will not be on its agenda. He can write to me if he wants.

Mr Holden: If my right hon. Friend gives me a short amount of time, I will come to exactly what he is after.

NH believes that this improved practice over the past couple of years is due to sharing best practice between regions, more detailed data on targeted litter collections, and improved engagement with local authorities and authorities that clear litter on A roads, including Transport for London. We are currently developing the third road investment strategy, and continue to explore further metrics for inclusion in it—my right hon. Friend might want to put some specific KSIs in. That will include a performance specification and possible improvements to the specific metrics, including on litter. I will write to him on the specifics of what National Highways has to report, on what it is held accountable for and on those KPIs.

Mr French: I have a constructive suggestion for the Minister and the Department on producing new metrics. They will be familiar with the job of clearing up TfL's mess by now—excuse the pun, but it is very deliberate. On the issue of responsibility and the impact of litter going on to motorways, we must consider consumer behaviour. However, there is an issue with some of the junctions that we have all spoken about, where litter is being blown through boroughs from TfL roads—I have mentioned the A2 and the A20. Certain boroughs want to clean the roads and some do not, and that is adding

to the problems on motorways. When producing KPIs and working with other bodies, I suggest that the Department ensures that they have their own practices in place, so that this does not add to the pressures on National Highways.

Mr Holden: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. This is about local authorities working together at TfL level in London and with National Highways, and I will ensure that his views regarding key performance indicators are taken into consideration.

I say to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead that the performance indicator is there. There is not a target; this is about monitoring at the moment. That is for RIS2, but KPIs might be exactly where we want to go at the next stage—I want to make that clear to him. We are working to ensure that there are targeted metrics in RIS3 and that the KPIs focus on the things that are most important to road users, and it is quite clear from today's debate that keeping the highways litter-free is one of them. The current situation is not tenable, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford said, and I will speak to National Highways about the specifics as we look at its KPIs for RIS3. Progress will involve considering responses to the forthcoming public consultation on the National Highways strategic road network initial report, and I urge right hon. and hon. Members, and interested parties, to feed into that. As I said earlier, there are discussions about introducing an awareness campaign going forward.

Regarding enforcement and the use of technology, I have spoken about using education and awareness to influence littering behaviours, and about the work and performance of National Highways in clearing litter from the SRN. I want to cover enforcement and penalties, because right hon. and hon. Members also mentioned them. The Government understand that enforcement plays a key role in this regard, especially for litter thrown from vehicles. The enforcement of penalties for littering is owned by DEFRA, and we work closely with it and National Highways to improve enforcement options. Local authorities may issue fixed penalty notices for littering offences committed in their areas where it can be proven that litter was thrown from a vehicle.

The Littering from Vehicles Outside London (Keepers: Civil Penalties) Regulations 2018 make provision about reporting littering from vehicles in England. In recent years, the Government have bolstered local authority enforcement powers by raising the upper limit on fixed penalty notices for littering and by introducing powers to issue the keeper of a vehicle from which litter is thrown with a civil penalty. As I said, I recently spoke to National Highways and visited its site at South Mimms, where I saw some of the cameras in action. National Highways passes on evidence of the most egregious cases of littering and fly-tipping, but more could be done to co-ordinate its work with local authorities. I will come on to some of that work, on which we are doing a pilot at the moment. In the end, though, it is for local authorities to decide whether to pass on that information and whether they believe they have sufficient evidence to take enforcement action in any given case.

Jack Brereton: I was going to ask the Minister about enforcement powers. As he has alluded to, National Highways does not have such powers. Is there no possibility

[Jack Brereton]

that we could consider giving National Highways some of those powers? I have previously had discussions with the organisation about other offences being committed on its network that it is totally powerless to deal with.

Mr Holden: That is a broader debate, and it is up to Parliament to decide where these powers lie.

I would like to give a shout-out to a few local authorities. I will mention a couple of other examples later, but North Lincolnshire Council, Newark and Sherwood District Council and North West Leicestershire Council are three that National Highways has said it works very closely with. In the majority of cases, they do prosecute when information is passed on. National Highways is also working closely with Brighton and Hove City Council and East Hampshire District Council too, and I will come on to East Hampshire again.

Sir Mike Penning: This is very important. Is the Minister saying, as I think he is, that if an alleged offence takes place on the motorway, a local authority can prosecute that individual or vehicle?

Mr Holden: I am, and in certain cases the police might prosecute if it is something more dangerous. National Highways can pass the information to local authorities so that they can prosecute. For the fly-tipping of some larger items, where for example people pull up at the side of the motorway and dump large quantities of rubbish, although the financial responsibility for clearing it up would be with National Highways, the local authorities could prosecute. For local authorities, it could be a win-win in terms of prosecution. National Highways clears it up, but the local authority can issue fixed penalty notices. Government guidance is available for local authorities on dealing with litter and issuing fixed penalty notices in the code of practice on litter and refuse.

Litter may also fall from vehicles that have insufficiently secured loads, as hon. Friends mentioned. That comes under section 8 of the Road Traffic Act 1991, and enforcement in that area is conducted by the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency and the police, as it is a more serious offence. Road users can contact the DVSA if they wish to report incidents. Hon. Members will probably be aware of people increasingly using dashcams to make such reports to the police and local authorities.

National Highways works with local authorities and the DVSA to ensure that enforcement is carried out where particular issues are evident. That has included providing evidence to local government and the police authorities from its camera network. That is the most effective method of enforcement, because the police and other authorities can look at a range of potential infractions in one go, rather than National Highways doing so in isolation. Currently, National Highways does not have the power to issue fines or prosecute, as it is not an enforcement agency; its focus is on safety and maintaining the road network.

The Government have no plans to give National Highways enforcement powers in tackling litter offences; however, the company is keen to use technology to help transform the roads it manages and create a road network that supports a modern country, and it is keen to work

with local authorities to prosecute. I undertake to write to all local authorities after today's debate to say, "When National Highways pass information to you, please do use it to prosecute," so that they are all in the same space on that. In answer to the point made by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough, National Highways does not itself issue fines; it is up to individual local authorities to do so.

The Government and National Highways are exploring the potential to harness technology to tackle littering, such as using numberplate recognition cameras for littering enforcement and to influence littering behaviour. We are trialling the use of geofencing to push anti-littering messages to customers' devices at 29 lay-bys on the A50 and the A180. In lay-bys where no bins are provided, we will push the message to encourage people to take litter home. Where bins are provided, their use will be encouraged. That activity will also enable us to better understand lay-by use. We will help to monitor those messages and their impact on the build-up of litter.

In partnership with East Hampshire District Council, in one of the more interesting developments in this space, we will shortly trial the use of CCTV to capture evidence of people littering in lay-bys in the south-east. We often have more issues in those lay-bys when there is stationary traffic. That is also one of the reasons more issues tend to occur at road junctions. East Hampshire will then issue fixed penalty notices or pursue prosecution—some cases will be very egregious—as appropriate. National Highways is unable to do that, because it is not the litter authority, but it wants to work with the council on it. Litter and vegetation will be cleared at sites so we will have the best ability to monitor the effectiveness of this approach. I will monitor the issue closely and, if it works well, I will happily look at rolling the pilot out more broadly to other local authorities across the country that are keen to do more work in this area.

We have also looked at using dashcams on National Highways vehicles, as well as artificial intelligence from moving vehicles. However, we have not yet found a cost-effective approach that works on littering.

For any approach to work, we need the relevant litter authority to partner with National Highways. I really hope that more local authorities will follow the lead of those local authorities who are working with us on this.

I will write to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead on driver awareness courses for littering offences. There have been some increases in fines in recent years, and I will write to him on what we are doing in that space as well. On community service, I will make sure that National Highways reaches out to authorities more, particularly post pandemic.

Let me finish by reaffirming my thanks to colleagues for this insightful debate. I hope that my right hon. Friend is satisfied, at least to some degree, with my response, which makes clear that we recognise the importance of tackling litter and holding National Highways' feet to the fire to do more in this space.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough mentioned the deposit return scheme. I understand her criticism. It is important that we get it right. We can see from what has happened in Scotland that not getting it right can cause more problems than it addresses. I want to make sure that we are in the right place on that scheme.

On private company contracts, my understanding from a conversation I had earlier today is that some of those privately managed contracts on parts of the motorway are in areas that are most clear of litter. If I find any specific issues on those contracts, I will write to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough.

We will continue to work hard to support the Government's wider ambitions around litter. We are confident that National Highways shares that ambition. As we move forward, it is important to continue to improve how we can hold it accountable for preventing and tackling litter on England's strategic road network.

5.52 pm

Sir Mike Penning: Having sat in his seat, I know how difficult that must have been for the Minister. In good faith, he has espoused what the Government would like National Highways to do. I do not think I am going to hold my breath on that. I know that is sceptical, perhaps even arrogant, but National Highways makes so many promises, not just in this area, but in others too, and does not come through on what it promises.

It is very simple. I do not want a special project in my part of the world—I guarantee that the junctions I have alluded to in this debate will get done in the next couple of days. That is not why I wanted this debate. I wanted to highlight that this country is blighted by rubbish. I specifically picked on the motorway system because there is one organisation that has a legal responsibility. This place put a legal responsibility on it to protect the environment and clear this mess up. Up until now, that has not been happening. Wherever the figures come from—that almost two thirds of the network is clear of rubbish—I am really sorry, but someone needs to go and check. All they need to do is drive down the motorways in my part of the world, under the junctions, and they will see.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered litter on motorways.

5.54 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 25 April 2023

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): Today, the Government are introducing the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill. The Bill will drive growth, innovation and productivity, ensuring that businesses and consumers in the UK reap the benefits of competitive markets. The Bill will:

boost innovation by increasing competition in digital markets, taking action against a small number of the most powerful tech companies that force businesses and consumers to sign up to unfair terms and pay inflated prices;

grow the economy by enhancing our wider competition regime to focus it on the areas of greatest harm, delivering a level playing field for businesses; and

protect consumers by strengthening the enforcement of consumer protection law and introducing new consumer rights, for example tackling subscription traps that currently set consumers back £1.6 billion a year.

Digital technologies have transformed the way we buy products and services, increasing accessibility, flexibility and choice, but we need to act now to address their potential for consumer harm. For instance, companies can make it unreasonably difficult for consumers to cancel a subscription, or inhibit choice by artificially ranking their own products higher in search results.

The Bill will give consumers greater choice and drive innovation, leading to new products that transform lives. It will also establish new, faster tools to address the unique barriers to competition in digital markets, allowing the Competition and Markets Authority to proactively drive more dynamic markets and prevent harmful practices such as making it difficult to switch between operating systems.

We are using the freedoms we have gained by leaving the EU to address these issues in a way that best works for the UK. We can now make our own decisions on how we maintain a proportionate system of regulation that drives innovation and protects consumers. Our new pro-competition regime, focused on the most powerful tech companies, is flexible and principles-based rather than following the EU Digital Markets Act's blanket set of obligations on all "gatekeepers", which risks creating unnecessary regulatory burdens for firms. Our more targeted and pro-innovation approach involves investigating specific harms, developing tailored obligations and taking more evidence-based regulatory decisions—informed by significant engagement with the firms themselves. We are also taking a power to ban unfair commercial practices, such as fake reviews, and are strengthening oversight of alternative dispute resolution services that would have been more constrained while in the EU.

The Bill will also support consumers through new and improved rights to deal with bad business practices such as subscription traps. This includes better information

up front as well as easier exiting and earlier cancellation rights. These and other new measures will save consumers' hard-earned cash and protect them from scams and rip-offs. We expect the Bill's enforcement reforms to increase consumer benefits by tens of millions of pounds above the CMA's current estimate of £146.5 million a year.

The Bill will grow the economy by boosting competition, better placing UK businesses to succeed in export markets. It will allow the CMA to more effectively deter, prevent and, where necessary, enforce against monopolistic behaviours, to ensure that the free market can operate effectively.

[HCWS737]

CABINET OFFICE

Resilience Update

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Secretary of State (Oliver Dowden): On Sunday, the Cabinet Office, working alongside the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and the UK's mobile network operators, delivered a successful test of the emergency alerts system.

The test was the largest simultaneous public message in UK history and was conducted in line with established international best practice. The test had two objectives: to test the operational performance of the system with a view to making technical or performance adjustments; and to raise public awareness of the system in advance of any use in a real emergency.

As I set out in my written ministerial statement to the House on 23 March, this is a critical step forward in the UK's ability to respond to and inform the public about emergency situations that present a threat to life or property. It is an important new tool in our toolkit to help keep the country safe.

The vast majority of compatible devices—4G and 5G enabled, an estimated 80% of the total number of mobile phones in the UK—received the alert. The alert was approved by the Cabinet Office at 14:59:08 and issued by networks within seconds. This was timed to minimise disruption to events, showings and fixtures due to begin at 15:00:00. Two versions of the alert were issued: one in English and the second a bi-lingual alert in English and Welsh. As intended, the broadcast continued until 15:21:00, when the Cabinet Office issued the instruction for networks to stop transmitting the alert.

No security or public safety issues have been reported as a result of the test. Likewise, no events or sporting fixtures were materially disrupted. The public were well prepared, following a wide-reaching public communications campaign in the six weeks prior to the test, including extensive engagement with organisations which support domestic abuse victims who might have a secondary hidden phone.

The Cabinet Office, the mobile network operators and other stakeholders are now conducting an exercise to identify and action operational issues following the test. One mobile network provider, Three UK, experienced an issue with supporting multiple messages. This led to some Three UK customers failing to receive the emergency alert. The Cabinet Office is working closely with Three UK to implement an appropriate fix to ensure that that does not happen with future emergency alerts.

A further issue arose with the Welsh version of the test message. Following a short internal review, we believe that this error occurred as a result of an operational process, whereby an online system made a small autocorrect, rendering one word in the Welsh test message incorrect. The essence of the message remained unchanged. We are also aware that a very small number of devices received more than one alert. Early technical assessment shows that this is due to a small number of cellular masts continuing to broadcast after the end of the test, which could affect users especially in areas of low mobile coverage. Anyone travelling between England and Wales during the test would also have experienced two alerts. This issue will be addressed as part of the lessons learned exercise.

The system is now fully operable in the event of a real emergency. Sunday's test serves as an important development in the roll-out of an emergency alerting system. It has allowed us to further validate the effectiveness of the system and to build public awareness, familiarity and trust. Following the UK-wide test, the Cabinet Office will conduct further operational testing. There are no current plans for a further UK-wide, or public, test of the system, though it is likely that there will be further public tests in the coming years to ensure the system is operational to help keep the British people safe.

[HCWS740]

EDUCATION

Further Education: Capital Loans Scheme

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): I am today announcing the opening of a new capital loans scheme. The scheme will provide loans to colleges in England with capital projects, either underway or in advanced stages of planning, that have a funding gap because of restrictions on commercial borrowing following the Office for National Statistics decision to classify colleges as part of central Government. The college capital loans scheme is in addition to the package of measures we announced at the point of reclassification, including an additional £150 million allocation of capital grant funding to be provided in April 2023, an additional £53 million focused on delivering small-scale energy efficiency improvements across the college estate provided in December 2022, and investing £300 million in reprofiling of payments before the end of the current financial year.

The Department for Education is making great progress in transforming the further education estate. In the current spending review period, we are investing £2.8 billion in England's college estate to build a world-class skills system that delivers the skills that the economy needs. This investment is improving the condition of the estate; providing new places in post-16 education; supporting the purchase of specialist equipment and facilities needed for T-Levels; and delivering the commitment to establish 20 institutes of technology across England. Most recently, we confirmed the £286 million FE capital transformation fund allocation. This will allow eligible colleges to prioritise and deliver projects to improve the condition of their estate.

I remain fully committed to the successful delivery and completion of all college capital projects benefiting from grant funding from my Department. All colleges delivering DFE grant-funded capital projects with evidence of intent to borrow commercially prior to reclassification will be eligible to apply for this new scheme. The scheme will also provide a route for meeting funding gaps faced by other capital projects being delivered by colleges themselves, including those funded by other Government Departments, subject to meeting the eligibility and assessment criteria set out in guidance published today.

We aim to offer loans to eligible DFE grant-funded capital projects by the summer, and self-funded capital projects by the autumn.

The new college capital loans scheme will ensure that our skills reforms stay on track, providing a ladder of opportunity that enables young people and adults to get good jobs and progress in their careers and build the skilled workforce that businesses need.

[HCWS739]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Energy Bills Discount Scheme

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): On 9 January 2023, the Government announced details of the energy bills discount scheme, which will come into force on 26 April 2023, with support backdated to 1 April 2023. This will follow on from the energy bill relief scheme, which ended on 31 March 2023, and has supported businesses and public sector organisations such as schools and hospitals by providing a discount on wholesale gas and electricity prices. The Government provided an unprecedented package of support for non-domestic users through the winter in the shape of the Energy Bill Relief Scheme, with total support of £7.3 billion expected to be provided under this scheme, shielding businesses and saving some around half of their wholesale energy cost.

Wholesale energy prices have fallen significantly since the introduction of the energy bill relief scheme. The energy bills discount scheme reflects this change and makes adjustments to the support provided under the energy bill relief scheme. The energy bills discount scheme strikes a balance between supporting businesses between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024 and limiting taxpayer's exposure to volatile energy markets. The scheme provides long-term certainty for businesses and reflects how the scale of the challenge has changed since September last year.

The energy bills discount scheme will provide all eligible businesses and other non-domestic energy customers with a discount on high gas and electricity bills until 31 March 2024, following the end of the energy bill relief scheme. It will also provide businesses in energy and trade-intensive industry sectors with a higher level of support as they are less able to pass these higher costs on to customers due to international competition. The energy bills discount scheme price reduction will be linked to the wholesale element of a non-domestic customer's gas and electricity bill and Government will reimburse suppliers in accordance with the scheme.

Further support will be available to domestic end users on heat networks, who fall under the energy bills discount scheme due to heat network operators having commercial energy contracts, to ensure they do not face disproportionately higher energy bills than consumers in equivalent households who benefit from the energy price guarantee. Heat suppliers will be required to apply for this support and then pass on any discounts to their customers in a “just and reasonable” way.

Eligibility for support under the energy bill relief scheme and the energy bills discount scheme will also be extended to additional non-standard cases not previously eligible. This includes: where non-domestic customers have received gas or electricity from licence-exempt suppliers via private wire—localised electricity grids connected to local distribution networks but linked to a privately-owned central plant which produces electricity; or pipe, where gas is conveyed to the customer’s premises by pipe; and where prices paid are pegged to wholesale energy prices.

Statutory instruments were made on 24 April and laid on 25 April. These will establish the energy bills discount scheme and ensure that essential energy bill support is provided to UK businesses in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, that are supplied both by licensed gas and electricity suppliers and licence-exempt suppliers. They will also ensure that any non-domestic business or individual that receives energy through an intermediary will also benefit from the energy bills discount scheme in a “just and reasonable” way.

The Government are also running a number of other energy support schemes. These include the energy bill support scheme which delivered a £400 discount to consumers during the winter period and the energy price guarantee which has been extended until the end of June and protects customers from increases in energy costs by limiting the amount suppliers can charge per unit of energy used.

[HCWS741]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): This Government have been clear that sewage discharging into our rivers is completely unacceptable. In August 2022 this Government published the “Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan”, with an accompanying impact assessment. It is a plan that sets stringent targets to protect people and the environment. This will require water companies to deliver the largest infrastructure programme in water company history, totalling an estimated £56 billion.

Today we are announcing plans to enshrine the plan further in law. Through the Environment Act 2021, we will legislate for a clear target on storm overflow reduction in line with our plan. A clear, credible, costed and legally binding target will add to our transparent and determined approach to solve this issue, while keeping consumer bills low. This will also be backed by existing separate interim targets for bathing waters and our most precious habitats. This will build on the direction we placed on water companies to introduce monitoring in 2013, which will reach 100% by the end of this year. We will also deliver our commitment to further reform

penalties to make them easier to apply, including proposing an unlimited penalty. We have also demanded that water companies provide action plans on every storm overflow by the summer.

[HCWS735]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan: 2022 Annual Report

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty):

I wish to inform the House that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, together with the Ministry of Defence, is today publishing the 2022 annual report on progress against the UK’s fourth national action plan on women, peace and security.

Published on 18 January 2018, the national action plan set out the Government’s objectives on the women, peace and security agenda for the period 2018 to 2022. The report published today outlines the progress made in 2022, including our work in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Libya, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Sudan, Somalia, Syria and Yemen. It focuses on the seven strategic outcomes that were the focus of the NAP.

On 23 February 2023, the UK launched its fifth NAP (2023 to 2027), setting out the Government’s strategy for how we will continue to meet our women, peace and security commitments, under UN Security Council Resolution 1325, to reduce the impact of conflict on women and girls, and to promote their inclusion in conflict resolution and in building peace and security. The UK Government are committed to putting women and girls at the heart of the UK’s foreign, defence and security policy, as we have seen from the recent publication of the “International Women and Girls Strategy”.

The annual report will be published on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS736]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Law Commission Review of Hate Crime Laws: Recommendation 8

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Miss Sarah Dines): I am pleased to announce the Government’s formal response to recommendation 8 of the Law Commission’s review of hate crime laws, which was published in December 2021. This review considered whether additional protected characteristics, including sex or gender, should be added to hate crime laws.

Section 72 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts (PCSC) Act 2022 requires the Government to respond to recommendation 8 of the Law Commission’s review within a year of the Act coming into effect. This followed considerable parliamentary interest in the issue dealt with by this recommendation, commonly known as “making misogyny a hate crime”.

In recommendation 8, the Law Commission states:

“We recommend that sex or gender should not be added as a protected characteristic for the purposes of aggravated offences and enhanced sentencing.”

The Government are extremely grateful for the comprehensive and thoughtful work that the Law Commission gave to its review, as well as the quality and depth of its consultation with the many stakeholders interested in this issue.

The Government agree with the Law Commission's recommendation. The Law Commission report highlights concerns relating to the potential negative consequences of adding sex or gender to hate crime laws, concluding that to do so would be

"more harmful than helpful, both to victims of violence against women and girls, and also to efforts to tackle hate crime more broadly."

The Government agree with these concerns. Accordingly, the Government do not intend to bring forward legislation to add sex or gender as a protected characteristic in hate crime law.

The Government's full response to recommendation 8 has been laid before Parliament and will also be available to view on www.gov.uk. This response fulfils the statutory commitment made in the PCSC Act 2022.

The full Government response to the remaining 33 recommendations made in the Law Commission's review of hate crime laws will be published in due course.

[HCWS734]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Intellectual Property Office: Performance Targets

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Paul Scully): I am repeating the following written ministerial statement made today in the other place by my noble Friend, the Minister for AI and Intellectual Property, Viscount Camrose:

Our innovation strategy sets our ambitions for an innovation-led economy. Now, more than ever, delivering the Government's bold plan to grow the UK economy and make it the most innovative and creative economy in the world is vital.

Intellectual property (IP) is a crucial component to unlocking this. IP rights provide incentives for our innovative businesses, our world-renowned scientists and cutting-edge creators to innovate and create, ensuring they are rewarded for their efforts, and wider society can benefit from their work.

We are well-known for our leadership in research and for our excellent scientific and academic institutions. Our innovative nature means businesses continue to start and grow in all areas of the UK. Our creative industries have a global reputation, particularly in music, cinema, literature and computer games. Our world-class IP system underpins this success, and it must continue to do so.

The Intellectual Property Office (IPO) plays a critical role in ensuring the right frameworks are provided to stimulate our innovative economy. The IPO are committed to delivering excellent IP services and developing world-leading IP policies and legislation so that customers can access, use and protect their IP effectively. In order to deliver these commitments, the IPO is also working to support and develop its people and set out a clearly stated organisational culture. The IPO Corporate Priorities 23/24 document sets out a clear plan to deliver during this financial year.

As an Executive Agency and trading fund of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), the IPO have set targets which are agreed by Ministers and laid before Parliament. I am pleased that today I can inform the House that for the financial year 23/24 the IPO's strategic targets are:

Launch our Transformed One IPO rights granting service for selected patents customers by end of March 2024.

Achieve an average overall customer satisfaction of 85% or more.

Define the ideal culture to deliver our strategy by October 2023 and develop a detailed culture change plan by January 2024 setting out how we will move from our current culture to our future ideal culture.

Achieve efficiencies worth at least 3.5% of our core operating costs.

The IPO will work with DSIT and other partner organisations to deliver on their priorities, ensuring they support wider Government aims and that resources are focused in areas that will drive innovation and creativity in the UK.

[HCWS738]

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**not later than
Tuesday 2 May 2023**

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