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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 6 September 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 wish to inform the House that I have received a letter from the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), informing me of her resignation as the Chair of the Petitions Committee. I therefore declare the Chair vacant. I can now announce the arrangements for the elections for the Chair of the Petitions Committee and the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee, which was declared vacant on Monday. Nominations for both elections will close at noon on Tuesday 17 October. Nomination forms will be available from the Vote Office, the Table Office and the Public Bill Office. Only Members from the Labour party may be candidates in the elections. If there is more than one candidate in either election, the ballot will take place on Wednesday 18 October, between 11 am and 2.30 pm, in the Aye Division Lobby. Briefing notes with more information will be made available in the Vote Office.

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Police Funding

1. **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): What recent discussions he has held with the Police Service of Northern Ireland on the potential impact of changes in the level of funding for policing in Northern Ireland on crime.

[906178]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): Today is my first anniversary in this amazing role—one of the very best jobs in Government. Some things, alas, have not changed in that time. Obviously, Stormont is not sitting. Some important anniversaries have been marked, including the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, and some things have really moved on and changed, including the Windsor framework resolving many of the issues with the Northern Ireland protocol, and indeed my former shadow, the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle). I warmly welcome his replacement, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), to his place, and indeed his deputy, the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson). May I place on the record my thanks to the hon. Member for Hove and his deputy for all the work they did with me in the course of the last year?

Policing in Northern Ireland is a devolved matter, as is the funding for it, and it is the responsibility of Northern Ireland Departments to allocate resources as they see fit.

Mary Glendon: I congratulate the Secretary of State on his anniversary. In July, the former chief constable warned that the force was at risk of being left unrecognisable due to budgetary pressures that could see the loss of more than 1,000 officers by 2025. With the force already at lower-than-ideal numbers and the recent data leak likely to have an impact, what discussions is the Secretary of State having with the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland and with the PSNI about how those pressures can be eased during this difficult time for the force?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I had a number of conversations with the former chief constable about this issue. The budget for 2023-24 gives the Department of Justice a total allocation of £1.2 billion. Obviously, recognising the unique security situation in Northern Ireland, the UK Government make additional contributions to the PSNI's counter-terrorism work through the additional security funding. The UK contribution for 2022-23 is £32 million. I am fully aware of the obvious issues that we talked about in the recent urgent question, and I am sure that we will get on to those a bit later in questions.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I wish my right hon. Friend a happy anniversary. I also thank, as he did, the outgoing shadow team and welcome the new. He is right to reference the recent data breach, which will have very much changed the backdrop of the morale of the police in Northern Ireland—and not just officers, but those in support services. Budgets are under pressure, as we know, but the security and safety of serving officers and those who work for the PSNI is always important, particularly post the data breach, given the potential risks from dissidents that that creates. Can he assure me that he will do all he can to deliver safety equipment, protection and security for those who are feeling most vulnerable at this time?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes, I absolutely can. I look forward to continuing to work closely with the PSNI's senior leadership team, who have a wealth of experience and are dedicated to keeping the people of Northern Ireland safe. I know that they are continuing to work closely to ensure the very best possible response to this breach. Just to give a tiny bit of detail, very briefly, the PSNI and security partners will continue to take proportionate action to protect their officers, staff and families and they have full Government support in responding to the data breach. At the moment, our focus remains on providing specialist support and expertise to the PSNI from across Government.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I congratulate the Secretary of State on his first anniversary and welcome the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) to his new role as shadow Secretary of State. We look forward to working with him.

This Secretary of State has rightly said that many aspects of policing in Northern Ireland are devolved, but the data breach is a matter of national security because it includes officers who work with the Security Service in a very specialist role involving counter-terrorism and intelligence in Northern Ireland. Will he assure the House that whatever resources are required by the PSNI, not only to fulfil that function but to protect its own officers and staff, will be made available?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for congratulating me on my anniversary. I was hoping that he might give me a different anniversary present, by heading back to Stormont, but perhaps we can have that conversation later.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson *indicated dissent.*

Chris Heaton-Harris: I have to ask, haven't I?

The right hon. Gentleman asks a very sensible and serious question, for which I thank him. I obviously cannot answer some elements of his question in public, but any additional funding required by the PSNI would be submitted through an established process. We are currently at the very beginning of that established process, so it would not be right to pre-empt that. The Government are clear that security is paramount, and our focus remains on the items I set out. It will move on, but it is currently specialist support and expertise in response to the latest assessments.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I thank the Secretary of State for that response. In his earlier answer he referred to the PSNI's senior leadership team. For the record, my party fully supports the PSNI in its impartial implementation of policing across all communities in Northern Ireland, but we are in a crisis situation, not only with the data breach but with the loss of confidence internally within the PSNI. Although it is the responsibility of the Policing Board to make appointments, does he agree that perhaps what we need now, in the absence of a chief constable, is for someone to be brought in who has the experience and leadership credentials that are needed in the interim period, pending the appointment of a new chief constable, to take control of this situation?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that question, the way he poses it and the point behind it. The senior management team is a strong and effective unit, and the Policing Board has a lot on its plate at this point in time. I believe it has even launched a review into how the Policing Board itself operates. I am quite sure that questions are being asked about what can be done in this space but, as of now, I can update the House only on what I have done.

Cost of Living

2. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the increased cost of living on people in Northern Ireland.
[906179]

7. **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the increased cost of living on people in Northern Ireland.
[906185]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): The UK Government are acutely aware of the cost of living pressures experienced in all parts of the UK since the onset of war in Ukraine. We provided an estimated £2 billion of financial support to Northern Ireland, including more than £1 billion in the form of the energy price guarantee and the additional £600 payment to help households with the rising cost of energy. Tackling inflation continues to be a top priority for this Government.

Patrick Grady: Every country in the world is having to deal with the impact of the war in Ukraine and the impact of the pandemic, but only one country is having to deal with the impact of Brexit, which is what is driving up prices and the cost of living for people in Northern Ireland and across the UK, isn't it?

Mr Baker: I am inclined just to say no. The reality is that this conversation will keep going to and fro. We have left the European Union and we are staying out of the European Union. Our task is to make sure that we flourish as a nation outside the EU, and I wish the hon. Gentleman would just get behind it and move on.

Chris Stephens: In June this year, according to research by the Trussell Trust, one in six people across Northern Ireland faced hunger, with nearly half of those referred to Trussell Trust food banks being children under the age of 16. In Scotland, primary school children get a £120 uniform grant and secondary school pupils get a £150 uniform grant, but the amount in Wales in Northern Ireland is almost a quarter of that. Given that parents are choosing between spending money on back-to-school supplies or on food, what steps is the Minister taking to ease the cost of living pressures on families in Northern Ireland?

Mr Baker: As I said, we provided a large sum of money to ease cost of living pressures in Northern Ireland. The hon. Gentleman mentions food banks, which are very much on my mind, given the scale of the food bank in Wycombe. I am very well aware of the cost of living pressures in Northern Ireland. We continue to put large sums of money into Northern Ireland, but it would be much better to deal with all these issues in the presence of a restored Executive.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): May I join in the congratulations to my right hon. Friend on his first anniversary? I also thank the new shadow Secretary of State for the huge contribution he has made as vice-chairman of the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly. In welcoming the money that has been provided to Northern Ireland to help with the cost of living pressures, does the Minister agree that it would be even better, and more efficiently spent, if the Executive were back up and running?

Mr Baker: Yes, I absolutely do; my right hon. and learned Friend is right on that. Time and again we are asked to intervene, and every time we are asked to intervene that is a call for direct rule. We do not intend to get into direct rule. It would be far better if local decisions were taken by a locally accountable Executive.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): The Government have shown their commitment to supporting the people of Northern Ireland through the recent increase in the cost of living. In the absence of an Executive—we all accept

that one is absolutely necessary—will my hon. Friend assure me that the Government will continue to intervene where necessary for the people of Northern Ireland?

Mr Baker: We will continue to work for the people of Northern Ireland, respecting the devolution settlement. For example, in recognition of the cost of living pressures faced by workers across the UK, the Government increased the national minimum wage rate by 9.7%, to £10.42 per hour for workers aged 23 and over, at the spring Budget. We will continue to be seized of the need to help those least well off.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): The cost of living crisis is clearly continuing to bite hard in Northern Ireland, with footfall at stores across Northern Ireland falling by 5% throughout August. What steps is the Department taking to enable people to take full advantage of the highly privileged economic status and market access that Northern Ireland now has, which this Government have deprived to the rest of the UK?

Mr Baker: I disagree with the hon. Gentleman's use of the term "deprived", but I am happy to tell him that next week we have the Northern Ireland investment summit. We are determined to attract private sector investment into Northern Ireland and to promote inclusion in that growth. Northern Ireland has a fantastically vibrant economy, and I very much hope that the least well-off will have opportunities through our investment in skills to develop themselves and to secure more better paying jobs in Northern Ireland, so that they can move on.

Economic Trends

3. **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the Northern Ireland economy; and if he will make a statement. [906180]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): We routinely monitor trends in the Northern Ireland economy. It has the ingredients required for economic success: exceptional talent, creativity and innovation. Although challenges persist, recent indicators suggest resilience and the potential for growth. This Government remain committed to fostering a productive environment for economic development and prosperity in Northern Ireland. I look forward to our investment summit between 12 and 13 September—next week—which is a fantastic opportunity to showcase Northern Ireland's economic potential to the world.

Mr Robertson: I thank the Minister for that encouraging response. He will be aware that Northern Ireland's largest trading partner by a very long way is Great Britain. It is therefore important that there is frictionless trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, so will he update the House on what discussions he has had on the future operation of the green channel?

Mr Baker: One of our priorities now is the successful implementation of the Windsor framework and that green channel. We will continue to have conversations with colleagues in the Cabinet Office who lead the

Windsor framework taskforce. I assure my hon. Friend that we are determined to ensure that that system works as seamlessly for everyone.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): Will the Minister confirm that at next week's investment conference the Government will proactively market Northern Ireland's dual market access under the Windsor framework?

Mr Baker: Yes, I can confirm that. I am absolutely determined that we shall do so. Indeed, next week I shall chair a session on that issue. This is not just about access as of right to the UK market and as a privilege to the EU market; it is also about being under our services regulation, which is an advantage, in combination with access to our free trade agreements, such as the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. This is a unique opportunity in all of the world, including right across the EU, and I am convinced that he and I, and we all, should make the most of it.

Restoration of Power Sharing

4. **Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help restore power sharing in Northern Ireland. [906181]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and it is good to see him in his place. Our focus remains on delivering for the people of Northern Ireland, who expect and deserve locally elected decision makers to address the issues that matter to them. I continue to engage regularly with all party leaders and speak to them very regularly indeed.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his answer, but the lack of a functioning devolved Government in Northern Ireland means that there are direct consequences for its people, as is evidenced by the highest waiting lists in the UK, which would not be tolerated elsewhere. In the absence of a restoration of power sharing, there needs to be a plan B—what is it?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Obviously, all my energies are spent on trying to resolve the issues in order to allow the DUP to come back to Stormont and get the Executive up and running. There are myriad options available if we were to go down different routes, but I am afraid none of them is as ideal as Stormont functioning and the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement all being stood up.

Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): There is a big opportunity over the coming weeks to restore the Northern Ireland Executive. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that key to that is the UK, Dublin and the EU listening harder to the concerns of the DUP about implementation of the Windsor agreement?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the former Secretary of State for that question; he is absolutely right. We have been listening in great detail to the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), the DUP leader, and his team of negotiators over the course of

the summer. We have had very detailed negotiations and I believe we are homing in on what is actually required. That might well mean we need conversations elsewhere, but let us see where we get to in the course of the next couple of days.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Windsor framework, which was agreed seven months ago, was a great achievement, but it was also intended to enable the restoration of power sharing in Northern Ireland. That has not happened. What is the Government's plan? The Secretary of State refers to the conversations he is having, but what is the plan to get Stormont back up and running?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I sincerely welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his place and thank him for his question. Currently, there are issues with one particular political party. We are talking to that party on a very regular basis at this point in time. Those talks have moved forward substantially, but he would have to check in with the DUP leadership to see if I am correct. Just because the right hon. Gentleman cannot see that does not mean that it is not happening. One thing I have learned, as I have said many times from this Dispatch Box, is that just because talks are being held in a confidential manner does not mean that they are not taking place and moving forward.

Hilary Benn: The Secretary of State knows that there are concerns in the Unionist community about unfettered access for Northern Ireland businesses trading with Great Britain. The Government said last month in the border target operating model that they are committed to that access, as we all are, and that:

"These arrangements will be enshrined and further strengthened in domestic legislation".

Can he tell the House when that legislation will be introduced?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Hopefully in very short order, dependent on making sure we have got it exactly right, so it answers the questions and allows Stormont and the Executive to re-form.

Postal Communications: Customs

5. **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): What steps he is taking to help ensure that postal communications between Britain and Northern Ireland are delivered without customs declarations. [906182]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): Under the Windsor framework, sending parcels to friends and family in Northern Ireland will be as smooth and easy as it is today, removing any burdensome paperwork, costs or delays. Northern Ireland consumers will be able to order from businesses in the rest of the UK and receive goods in the post as they do now, without customs processes or burdensome costs. This will maintain consumer choice for British goods in Northern Ireland. Businesses sending goods to other businesses will use our new green lane.

Jim Shannon: A number of constituents and consumers have contacted me to highlight that many eBay or Amazon providers will no longer ship to Northern Ireland as they state that they cannot afford the enhanced fees, demonstrating that Northern Ireland continues to be treated differently. It is costing small businesses and individuals the ability to shop around. What steps can the Minister take to revisit the framework with our EU counterparts, to ensure free and fair trade throughout the United Kingdom that is clear and easy to follow for all businesses?

Mr Baker: Under the protocol as it was, all parcels would have needed to complete full international customs processes. I believe that the suppliers to whom the hon. Gentleman refers will be making their plans under the protocol as it was. Under the Windsor framework, parcels to consumers will not be subject to those burdensome processes. He reminds us all that we need to redouble our efforts to communicate to suppliers the message that they will be able to take advantage of a new green lane and supply to consumers in Northern Ireland. It is a subject close to my heart, and I can see that it is extremely close to his too.

Public Finances

6. **Aaron Bell** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure the sustainability of Northern Ireland's public finances. [906184]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): The Northern Ireland Budget (No. 2) Bill 2023-24 is progressing through Parliament and is due to be debated in the other House next week. The Secretary of State has used his powers to request information and advice from the Northern Ireland civil service on measures that could generate revenue and improve the sustainability of public finances.

Aaron Bell: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. I congratulate him and the Secretary of State on their anniversaries and pay tribute to them for all they have done in the past year.

Some have suggested that we could reform the Barnett formula to address the sustainability of public finances in Northern Ireland, but does my hon. Friend agree that that is not a silver bullet, and that trade-offs will need to be made to fund public services?

Mr Baker: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. This is a very important point. Although we will remain open to discussing proposals put to us by the Northern Ireland parties, it would not be a silver bullet to reform the Barnett formula. An Executive will still need to make trade-offs when they decide to spend scarce resources. Negotiations between the Welsh Government and the Treasury on a fiscal framework, which included an adjustment to the Barnett formula, took place over seven years, so, with the best will in the world, it is not an issue that can be solved overnight. What we need is a functioning Executive and we stand ready to work with that Executive. In the meantime, we will continue to engage with the Northern Ireland civil service on a range of measures that could improve fiscal sustainability.

Mr Speaker: Let me welcome the shadow Minister.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Early years services are vital for children to reach their potential, but they are underfunded and at risk in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK without a childcare strategy. According to the Department for Education, it was delayed again because early years faces potential significant budget reductions. When can hard-pressed families in Northern Ireland expect the childcare strategy? Will the Minister commit to early years services receiving the increased multi-year funding that is needed to invest in children?

Mr Baker: I am glad to welcome the hon. Lady to her place. As she knows, education is devolved in Northern Ireland and it is a matter for the Education Department there to take these decisions, but her point is well made, and I am confident that, when she makes her first visit to Northern Ireland, like me she will be engaging with all parties on just such issues.

Electricity Generation

8. **Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): What recent discussions he has held with the Department for the Economy officials on electricity generation and supply after 30 September 2023. [906186]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris):

My officials and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero are engaging with the Northern Ireland Department for the Economy to understand the facts and to assess any extra requirements. Energy is a devolved matter.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Secretary of State for that response, but can he indicate to people who are concerned about recent newspaper speculation on the future of generation and supply in October and beyond that it is secure and that there will be no hiccup or hiatus between now and Christmas?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his supplementary question. Northern Ireland benefits from being part of the United Kingdom with access to electricity from Great Britain through the interconnector, and it also benefits from being part of the single electricity market on the island of Ireland. I and the Minister of State worked hard to ensure that that was preserved during the UK's exit from the European Union. We are working very closely with all officials across Government here and in the Northern Ireland civil service to ensure that the right preparations are in place for the winter.

Veterinary Products and Horticultural Stock

9. **Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): What recent assessment he has made of the availability of (a) veterinary products and (b) horticultural stock in Northern Ireland. [906187]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): The cliff edge on veterinary medicines has been removed, protecting the supply of those medicines in Northern Ireland through to 2025, while we work through sustainable, long-term solutions. We are much more optimistic about reaching those solutions in the context of the Windsor framework. There will no longer be any

need for costly phytosanitary certificates for each movement of plants staying in the UK. We have paved the way for 11 banned plant species to move again by the time of the next planting season. These were priority cases identified by the industry itself, and we have progressed further cases since announcing the Windsor framework. We are working closely with a wide range of stakeholders to ensure that gardeners, farmers and growers can access plants and seeds from a wide variety of sources.

Ian Paisley: With regards to veterinary medicines, I fear the Minister's sunny optimism may be somewhat misplaced. After all, his preferred stakeholder—Mr Bernard Van Goethem, the deputy director general for food sustainability—has made it abundantly clear to DEFRA and the UK Government that the negotiations on this matter are “over”. The deal is done. There will be no change to veterinary medicines. This means that insulin will no longer be available in Northern Ireland for animals. Veterinary medicines for botulism—144,000 were issued last year—will no longer be available. What will the Secretary of State and the Minister do about this?

Mr Baker: The hon. Gentleman has presented me with information about which I was not aware beforehand. I am certainly happy to look at what has been said, but what I would say to him is that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister did the deal that no one said could be done. That has transformed the relationship with the European Union, and I am therefore confident that we will be able to deliver a deal on veterinary medicines. As we sometimes say, I do not recognise the information that the hon. Gentleman has presented. It is new to me, and I shall be glad to look at it, but we will certainly have to deliver a deal.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The Ulster Farmers Union estimates that 1,700 veterinary medicines could be withdrawn from the market in Northern Ireland unless the Windsor framework is fixed. I urge the Minister to do that.

Mr Baker: Certainly. My right hon. Friend makes her point with great clarity. Of course, having made it on an occasion such as this, it has been heard by a wide range of Ministers, and I am confident that we will be able to redouble our efforts to deliver what we need on veterinary medicines.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Mr Speaker: I welcome everybody back to Prime Minister's questions.

Q1. [906228] **Mr Louie French** (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 6 September.

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): I would like to start by congratulating Sarina Wiegman and the Lionesses on their fantastic performance at the World cup. We are all incredibly proud of them. I also know that the whole House will join me in sending condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of Sergeant Graham Saville. It is

testament to his bravery that he died in the line of duty, and a terrible reminder of the work that the police do every day to keep us safe.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Mr French: The Labour party used to claim that it represents working-class people, but Labour's ultra low emission zone expansion to Greater London will now hammer millions of working people with bills of £12.50 per day, or £4,500 per year. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is unacceptable that Londoners and those in surrounding counties face this regressive and unacceptable tax, and will he do everything that he can to help working people?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is disappointing that last week the Labour leader allowed the Labour Mayor to introduce ULEZ, charging hard-working people £12.50 every time they start their car, adding to the burden of the cost of living. All I can say is that while we focus on helping hard-working families, all the Labour leader does is punish them.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Leader of the Opposition.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in congratulating the Lionesses, and also in his comments about Sergeant Saville; I think we speak for the whole House when we speak on that subject.

I also extend the warmest welcome to my hon. Friend the new Labour Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather). He has already made history for the Labour party by overturning the largest Tory majority ever in a by-election. I also welcome the hon. Members for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Steve Tuckwell) and for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke).

The roof of Singewell Primary School in Gravesend collapsed in May 2018. Thankfully, it happened at the weekend and no children were injured. The concrete ceiling was deemed dangerous and liable to collapse, and everyone knew that the problem existed in other schools, yet the Prime Minister decided to halve the budget for school maintenance just a couple of years later. Does he agree with his Education Secretary that he should be thanked for doing a "good job"?

The Prime Minister: I know how concerned parents, children and teachers are, and I want to start by assuring them that the Government are doing everything that we can to fix this quickly, and minimise the disruption to children's education. We make no apology for acting decisively in the face of new information.

Let me provide the House with an update on where we are. Of the 22,000 schools in England, the vast majority will not be affected. In fact, in two thirds of inspections of suspected schools, RAAC—reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—is not actually present. To tackle the 1% of schools that have been affected so far, we are assigning each school a dedicated caseworker and providing extra funding to fix the problem. In the majority of cases, children will attend school as normal, and the mitigations take typically just days or weeks to

complete. We will do everything we can to help parents, support teachers and get children back to normal school life as quickly as possible.

Keir Starmer: Wood Green Academy in Sandwell was on Labour's building list in 2010. The Conservatives scrapped it, and now children there are in a crumbling school. The head of the National Audit Office accuses the Prime Minister of taking a "sticking plaster approach". The NAO report says he cut £869 million. The person who ran the Department for Education says the Prime Minister is personally responsible. On Monday, he leapt to his own defence, saying it is "utterly wrong" to blame him—so why does literally everyone else say it is his fault?

The Prime Minister: The professional advice from the technical experts on RAAC has evolved over time. Indeed, it is something that successive Governments have dealt with, dating back to 1994. As new advice has come forward, the Government have rightly, decisively and swiftly acted in the face of that advice.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman talked about school budgets and what I had done, but let me just walk him through the facts of what that spending review actually did, because he brought it up—[*Interruption.*] No, he brought it up, so presumably he would like to hear the facts. Funding for school maintenance and rebuilding will average £2.6 billion a year over this Parliament as a result of that spending review, representing a 20% increase on the years before. Indeed, far from cutting budgets as he alleges, the amount spent last year was the highest in a decade. That spending review maintained the school rebuilding programme, delivering 500 schools over a decade, a pace completely consistent with what had happened previously. It is worth pointing out that, during the parliamentary debates on that spending review, the Labour party, and he, did not raise the issue of RAAC one single time. Before he jumps on the next political bandwagon, he should get his facts straight.

Keir Starmer: Carmel College in Darlington was on Labour's building list in 2010. The Conservatives scrapped it, and now children there are in a crumbling school. On the one hand, we have the Prime Minister saying it is nothing to do with him, and on the other hand we have the facts. There is a simple way to clear this up. Why does he not commit to publishing the requests from the Department for Education for the school rebuilding programme and what risks he was warned of before he turned them down?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman has now brought up twice the Labour school rebuilding programme, so let us just look at the facts surrounding it, because we do know the truth about that programme. The NAO, which he has called on, reviewed that programme later on, and what did it find? It found that Labour's school rebuilding programme excluded 80% of schools. Next, what did it find? It found that it was one third more expensive than it needed to be, needlessly wasting resources that have gone to schools. The worst bit—because now he is talking about the physical condition of schools—is that that programme allocated funds solely on the basis of ideology, with no regard whatsoever to the physical condition of schools. That is why the independent James review described the programme as "time consuming" and "expensive"—just like the Labour party.

Hon. Members: More!

Mr Speaker: Order. We do not want to start off with somebody leaving early, because that is what will happen.

Keir Starmer: Well, Mr Speaker, Conservative Members want more, so let me continue. Ferryhill School in County Durham was on Labour's building list in 2010. The Government scrapped that, and now children there are in a crumbling school. The truth is that this crisis is the inevitable result of 13 years of cutting corners, botched jobs and sticking plaster politics. It is the sort of thing you expect from cowboy builders: saying that everyone else is wrong and everyone else is to blame, and protesting that they have done an effing good job even as the ceiling falls in. The difference is that in this case, the cowboys are running the country. Is the Prime Minister not ashamed that, after 13 years of Tory Government, children are cowering under steel supports stopping their classroom roof from falling in? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Seriously, calm down. I understand that this is the first session and people are excited to be back at school, but we expect better behaviour.

The Prime Minister: This is exactly the kind of political opportunism that we have come to expect from Captain Hindsight here. Before today, he has never once raised this issue with me across the Dispatch Box. It was not even worthy of a single—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The same applies to those on the Labour Benches. We will have a calmer Question Time going forward, because I want to hear the questions and the answers, just like your constituents.

The Prime Minister: Before today, the right hon. and learned Gentleman never once raised this issue with me in Parliament. It was not even worthy of a single mention in his so-called landmark speech on education this summer. If we had listened to him, our kids would have been off school and locked down for longer—it is as simple as that. He talks about 13 years; well, let us see what has happened. When we came into office, two thirds of schools were rated “good” and “outstanding”; now, it is 90%. We introduced the pupil premium to get more funding to the most disadvantaged pupils. Today, they are 75% more likely to go to university. And, as a result of our reforms, we now have the best readers in the western world. That is what 13 years of education reform gets you, all of which was opposed by the Labour party.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister claims to be a man of detail, but there have been 100 parliamentary questions from the Opposition on this issue, and an Opposition day motion. Let us continue: Holy Family Catholic School in Bradford was on the Labour building list in 2010. The Government scrapped that, and now children there too are in a crumbling school—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Holden, I have heard enough. This is the last time; make up your mind. Either you go now or you are quiet for the remainder.

Keir Starmer: If you can believe it, Mr Speaker, in April this year, the Education Secretary signed a contract for refurbishment of her offices. It has her personal stamp of approval on it. It cost—I cannot quite believe

this—£34 million. Can the Prime Minister explain to parents whose children are not at school this week why he thinks that a blank cheque for a Tory Minister's office is better use of taxpayer's money than stopping schools from collapsing?

The Prime Minister: What I say to parents is that, on the receipt of new information, we have acted decisively to ensure the safety of children and minimise disruption to education, as we have laid out and communicated extensively. That is the right thing to do. I also gently point out to the right hon. and learned Gentleman that, while the Department for Education started this process 18 months ago in spring of last year, as far as I can tell, Labour-run Wales still does not know which schools are affected.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman brought up funding, so again, let us look back to what happened in that spending review. In that spending review, I increased the Department for Education's capital budget by 25% to a record £7 billion; it tripled the amount that we spend on children with special educational needs and disabilities; it improved the condition of the overlooked further education estate; and it set the course for per-pupil funding to be the highest ever. Crucially, it also invested £5 billion to help our pupils recover the lost learning from covid. He might remember that, because we wanted pupils learning; he wanted longer lockdowns.

Keir Starmer: I just do not think the Prime Minister gets how, “It's all fine out there” is at odds with the lived experience of millions of working people across this country.

Let us go on—this is a long list. In 2010, at least six schools in Essex were on Labour's building list; the Government scrapped them and now children there are in crumbling schools. The Prime Minister will not admit that the reason he cut budgets and ignored the warnings is quite simple: just as he thought his tax rises were for other families to pay, he thinks his school cuts are for other families to endure. Does that not tell us everything we need to know? He is happy to spend millions of taxpayers' money sprucing up Tory offices, and billions to ensure that there is no VAT on Tory school fees, but he will not lift a finger when it comes to protecting other people's schools, other people's safety and other people's children.

The Prime Minister: I know that the right hon. and learned Gentleman comes here with prepared scripts, but he has not listened to a single fact, over six questions, about the record amounts of funding going into schools, or the incredible reforms to education impacting the most disadvantaged children in our society—a record that we are rightly proud of. Yes, we can name the schools: that is because we are reacting to information and publishing it so that we know where the issues are—something that we are still waiting for from the Welsh Government.

Of course the right hon. and learned Gentleman wants to score political points from something that we are dealing with in the right and responsible way, but I note that he has not mentioned a single other thing that has happened since we last met at the Dispatch Box. He talked about hard-working families across Britain, but what has happened to energy bills? Down.

What has happened to inflation? Down. What has happened to small boat crossings? Down. And what has happened to economic growth? It has gone up. The right hon. and learned Gentleman tried time and again to talk down the British economy, but thankfully, people were not listening. His entire economic narrative has been demolished, and the Conservatives are getting on delivering for Britain. [HON. MEMBERS: "More!"]

Mr Speaker: There will be more. I call Nicola Richards.

Q2. [906229] **Nicola Richards** (West Bromwich East) (Con): Against a backdrop of improving economic news, inflation falling, energy bills coming down and growth up, people in the west midlands are disappointed to see that Labour-run Birmingham City Council has gone bankrupt. As a Sandwell resident and a West Bromwich MP, I am no stranger to Labour incompetence. Does the Prime Minister agree that Labour have demonstrated yet again that they always run out of other people's money?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is exactly right. We started by hearing how Labour in London are charging hard-working people with ULEZ, and now we are hearing about how Labour in Birmingham are failing hard-working people, losing control of taxpayers' money and driving their finances into the ground. They have bankrupted Birmingham; we cannot let them bankrupt Britain.

Mr Speaker: We come to the SNP leader.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The public need no reminding that today marks a year since the Prime Minister's predecessor, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), took office. Upon her speedy departure, they will have thought that things were going to get better, but unemployment figures are higher, food prices are higher, mortgage rates are higher, and economic growth is stagnant. When is the Prime Minister going to get off his backside and do something about it?

The Prime Minister: What the hon. Gentleman failed to point out is the amount of times I have sat across the Dispatch Box from him and his colleagues and heard how somehow, we were a laggard when it came to growth. He did not take the opportunity to correct the record now that figures have been published, which demonstrate that in fact, we had the fastest recovery of any European economy after covid.

Stephen Flynn: Mr Speaker, you would be forgiven for thinking that the Prime Minister thinks everything is all right, but let us look at his proposals for a winter cost of living package. On energy bills, his plan is to do nothing; on mortgage bills, his plan is to do nothing; and on food bills, his plan is to do nothing. When the Secretary of State for Education said earlier this week that everyone was doing nothing, she was referring to the Prime Minister; wasn't she?

The Prime Minister: I think the hon. Gentleman is a little out of practice, because we have paid around half a typical family's energy bills over the past year. That is support worth £1,500, benefiting families in Scotland.

On mortgages, the Chancellor's mortgage charter covers 90% of the mortgage market, and ensures that a typical mortgage holder can save hundreds of pounds a month on mortgage refinancing. On energy, thanks to the actions of this Government, we are supporting the hundreds of thousands of jobs in the Scottish oil and gas industry, securing this country's energy supply, which he opposes. I will always do what is right for the people of Scotland, and it is time the SNP did the same.

Q6. [906233] **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): I was delighted when the Prime Minister said last year that, on his watch, we would "not lose swathes" of farmland to solar applications, instead rightly arguing for solar to be installed on rooftops, yet my constituency sees a constant flow of planning applications for solar farms and battery storage plants on food-producing land. Can I ask my right hon. Friend: when will his pledge become a reality?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Solar is one of the cheapest forms of electricity generation, so it is right that we try and see more of it across the country, but we do need to protect our most valuable agricultural land so that it can produce food for the nation and increase our food security. That is why, thanks to our changes, the planning system now sets this out explicitly with a clear preference for brownfield sites. Of course, we want to do more to encourage barn-top solar, and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will be updating the House with further information on that policy in due course.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): Last week, the Prime Minister stated that he was "proud" of his furlough scheme. I wonder if he is equally proud of the £400 billion he put on the national debt and the inflation it has caused. Is he proud of the jobs lost, businesses closed and lives crushed due to the lockdowns? Is he proud of the increased NHS waiting lists, premature deaths and the 1 million young people now needing mental health support? Finally, is he proud of the excess deaths affecting every one of our constituencies that nobody wants to talk about, and will he give an undertaking to the British public—a solemn undertaking—that they will never be inflicted upon them again?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows, there is a formal inquiry regarding covid, which will examine all the decisions that were made, including lockdown, and the impacts of them. But with regard to the furlough scheme, I am proud that, at a time of extreme anxiety in the country, facing an unprecedented situation, this Government put their arms around the British public to ensure that we protected 10 million jobs. As the report from the Office for National Statistics showed last week, those actions, combined with all the other things we did to support the economy, ensured that we had the fastest recovery through the pandemic of any European nation.

Q7. [906234] **Dr Neil Hudson** (Penrith and The Border) (Con): As we are a nation of animal lovers, the Conservative Government's record on animal welfare is a source of great pride, but, sadly, too many abuses remain—from pet theft, the smuggling of puppies and heavily pregnant

dogs and dogs with their ears horrifically cropped to the illegal export of horses to Europe for slaughter. These issues are personal to me as a veterinary surgeon and to my constituents, especially animal theft and livestock worrying. Can the Prime Minister reassure the House that animal welfare is a key Government priority, and that he will bring forward the necessary legislation to tackle these issues as soon as possible?

The Prime Minister: May I thank my hon. Friend for both raising this issue and also his work and expertise in the area? I am proud that, thanks to the actions that previous Governments have taken on things like cat microchipping, the ivory ban and raising the maximum sentence for animal cruelty to five years, we are now the highest ranked G7 nation on World Animal Protection's animal protection index, but we are determined to go even further and deliver on our manifesto commitments individually during the remainder of this Parliament.

Q3. [906230] **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): The Prime Minister has said he will lead a Government of honesty, accountability and integrity, so can he explain how he was found to have breached the code of conduct, this time for failing to declare his wife's shares in a childcare agency that received a monetary boost from measures in his Budget?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Lady reads the full transcript and the full findings, she will see a detailed explanation of what happened, which the commissioner described as a "minor and inadvertent" breach, given that at the time I was not aware of the policy that was being discussed with me, and corrected it later on and could have corrected it with slightly different language. She will also know that I am not the only person across these Dispatch Boxes that has had the same thing happen to them.

Q9. [906236] **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): May I interest the Prime Minister in proposals from the commission for carbon competitiveness, which I chair, that would deliver net zero cheaply and without deindustrialising our economy? It would help British manufacturers facing imports from countries with lower energy costs, make our exports more competitive everywhere, and cut fuel duty at home. We have strong backing from Britain's heavy industries, and cross-party support from the excellent hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), whose name is also on the Order Paper. Would the Prime Minister consider adding his name to our list of supporters as well?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and the commission for carbon competitiveness for the report that he has worked on and highlighted, and the Government are absolutely committed to putting in place the necessary policies for UK industry to decarbonise successfully. As he will be aware, the Government recently consulted on addressing carbon leakage in particular, with a range of potential options. We are in the process of considering those responses, and will issue a formal response in due course.

Q4. [906231] **Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): Every year, billions of wet wipes go out into our rivers and oceans, and clog up our sewers. I have been campaigning for years to ban plastic in wet wipes. The Government have

finally promised to ban plastic in wet wipes, but that was five months ago and there has been nothing since then. Will the Prime Minister today finally give a date for when that ban will come into force and make a difference to our environment, or is this another broken promise from his zombie Government?

The Prime Minister: In the comprehensive "Plan for Water" that was published by the Environment Secretary in April, we confirmed our intention to ban wet wipes containing plastic, subject, as is legally proper, to a public consultation. That consultation will be launched in the coming months, in autumn this year, and I know Ministers will keep the House updated on progress.

Q12. [906239] **Craig Mackinlay** (South Thanet) (Con): I would like to offer some assistance on the small boats issue. Has my right hon. Friend considered the incongruity of the fact that a UK dinghy manufacturer trying to sell into the EU market would have to apply the CE marking, customs codes and could be stopped and checked, and a similar situation applies, perversely, with a simple thing like Great Britain to Northern Ireland trade? But none of that applies, seemingly, when huge, supersize, dangerous cut-and-shut dinghies are taken from Turkey, across the EU border into Bulgaria and Greece. Is my right hon. Friend as confused as I am by the EU's double standards on that matter?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we must do all we can to stop the boats and tackle illegal migration. We know that the export of small boats across parts of the European continent is a vital element of the smuggling gangs' tactics. That is why, specifically, we are stepping up joint operations with Turkey—I raised this with the President when we spoke—so that we can tackle organised immigration crime, and specifically disrupt the supply chain of boat parts that are used for these dangerous crossings. I will continue to keep him updated on our progress.

Q5. [906232] **Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Two years ago in Plymouth, we lost five people in the worst mass shooting the country has seen for a decade. The Government have finally consulted on firearms reform, but after pressure from shooting groups, even those sensible measures look like they could be watered down. Will the Prime Minister bow down to lobbyists from the shooting industry, or will he stand with the grieving families, and with those in Plymouth who want to see no tragedy like this ever happen again, with stronger gun laws?

The Prime Minister: I know how important this issue is to the hon. Gentleman, following the horrific shooting in his constituency, and my thoughts are with the family of all those who were killed. He will know that firearms are subject to stringent controls, and rightly so, but those controls are kept under constant review. For example, we have taken action to improve information sharing between GPs and the police, to ensure that people are not given access to firearms without their medical conditions being checked. There is statutory guidance that the chief officers of police have been improving, so that how people apply for firearms is assessed properly, including checks on social media. On

the matter that the hon. Gentleman specifically raises, the Home Office is in the process of considering responses to that consultation, and will respond in due course.

Q13. [906240] Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Later today, I am bringing forward a ten-minute rule Bill, to include the provision of automated external defibrillators in all new housing developments of 10 dwellings or more. Will my right hon. Friend support that provision, and ask his relevant Cabinet colleagues to engage with me to ensure that these life-saving pieces of equipment can become commonplace where they can have the most impact, close to people's homes?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of these lifesaving devices. That is why the national planning policy framework already expects planning policies and decisions to promote public safety, but it is also why recently the Government launched a million-pound fund that will place around 1,000 new defibrillators in communities across England to help improve equality of access to these lifesaving devices.

Q8. [906235] Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): In 2019, the Outwood Academy Riverside free school application in Middlesbrough was approved, with its first year 7 intake arriving the following year. There have been further intakes every year since, but there is still no new building. I have had no response to my request for a meeting with the Secretary of State, but that original intake are destined to spend their entire secondary education in various temporary adapted premises. With pupils being shunted around old buildings, talk of levelling up and addressing the GCSE attainment gap rings hollow. Will the Prime Minister and his Education Secretary get off their derrières and sort this out?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to ensure that the hon. Gentleman gets an answer to his specific question on that school, but more generally I am proud of what the Government are doing in Teesside and Tees Valley to support education, not only with the recent announcement of new sixth forms, but also it is an education investment area receiving extra funding and resources. That is why we have seen standards in reading and maths increase considerably, and we are determined to keep going.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): The Prime Minister is aware of how the RAAC issue has affected schools in Essex. We have a high number of schools that have been impacted. He has rightly said today that the Government are doing everything they can to get children back to school. I know there is a debate on this later today, but will he commit to fully funding both the capital and revenue costs associated with getting children back into school?

I hope he will commit to meeting the leader of Essex County Council, because it is pioneering some great reforms right now, where it is looking to support maintained schools as well as academy trusts. I think the Government could get some good insights into how we can get children back to school fast and look at the funding model.

The Prime Minister: First, I thank my right hon. Friend for her constructive engagement with the Department. I pay tribute to her school leaders and local authority for everything they are doing. I am happy to give her the reassurance, as the Chancellor has already said, that new funding will be provided to schools to deal with this issue. To ensure that we can get through this as quickly as possible for my right hon. Friend's constituents and parents—and, indeed, everyone else's—the Department for Education is in the process of increasing the number of dedicated caseworkers from 50 to 80. We have 35 project directors regionally on the ground to support, and we have more than doubled the number of survey firms, so that we can rapidly over the next few weeks fully assess all the relevant schools and have a mitigation plan in place.

Q10. [906237] Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Steelworkers in my constituency have watched in frustration as other Governments have pumped investment into decarbonisation while successive Tory Governments have sat on their hands. When will the Prime Minister finally conclude the talks with Tata Steel? Can he guarantee that level of investment will match what other European Governments are doing on decarbonisation? And will he guarantee that the conclusion will be based on serious engagement, comprehensively with the steel unions?

The Prime Minister: Steel is absolutely vital to the UK. This matter is of course of interest to the hon. Gentleman, but I have also discussed it extensively with my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft), and that is because the industry supports local jobs and economic growth. Conversations with specific companies, such as Tata, are ongoing, but they are understandably commercially sensitive. We share the ambition of securing a decarbonised, sustainable and competitive future for the industry in this country. In the meantime, we are supporting the sector with our energy-intensive industries exemption, which provides discounted energy bills. We also have the industrial energy transformation fund, which supports steel companies with their energy bills and the transition through capital to a greener future.

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): Two weeks ago the Government announced that the Bolsover School's bid for a sixth form in my constituency has been successful. Across the country, some 52% of school leavers at 16 years old go on to a sixth form, but in Bolsover it is 23%, in Clowne it is 22%, and in Shirebrook it is 7%. Will the Prime Minister join me in thanking the Redhill Academy Trust, Matthew Hall, the headteacher of Bolsover School, and all those who have helped to bring a sixth form to Bolsover?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate Redhill and everyone involved with the successful bid for the new sixth form in Bolsover. I am delighted that the bid was successful. I know that my hon. Friend shares my desire to ensure a world-class education for every single one of our young people across the country, because that is the best way to provide them with the opportunity for a better life. The new programme of sixth forms will deliver that in his constituency and many others across the nation.

Q11. [906238] **Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): The north-east has been underfunded in terms of transport investment for decades. HS2, which was meant to be an economic development and connectivity lifeline, is now not coming anywhere near, the A1 Northumberland dualling decision has been delayed yet again, and our regional rail services are still running on outdated infrastructure and rolling stock.

With all that in mind, will the Prime Minister commit the funding to reopen the Leamside line from Gateshead to County Durham to take pressure off the east coast main line and aid economic wellbeing and the movement of passengers and freight services in the north-east of England? Or is levelling-up just rhetoric?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, it would not be right for me to comment on specific projects, but to give the hon. Gentleman a sense of our commitment, what I can tell him is that in real terms since 2010 we have spent over a third more in central capital investment in northern transport every single year compared with Labour's last six years in government. That is what we are doing for northern transportation. Specifically, when it comes to reopening and restoring railway lines, where was the first one that we did? From Ashington to Blyth.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I have a cheerful question that I know my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will find impossible to resist. He will be aware of the work that I have been doing with No. 10's UK Ambassador for mental health, Dr Alex George, to establish early intervention mental health hubs across the country. We have got the pilot, which seems to be lost somewhere between the Treasury and the Department of Health—I know he will sort that problem out—but will he meet Dr Alex George and me to discuss it further? These hubs will make a massive difference in constituencies across the country. We all know the problems with child and adolescent mental health services and the perverse situation where children and young people have to get progressively worse before they get the treatment they need. I know that the Prime Minister will be very supportive of this one, Mr Speaker.

The Prime Minister: I know that my hon. Friend is rightly a passionate advocate for improving mental health support for young people, which is something I know we are doing, and I am proud of our record, particularly in increasing the number of mental health support teams who work with schools and expanding community services. I know that the Department of Health and Social Care is looking at the role that early support hubs might play in this plan, but I am happy to meet my hon. Friend personally to discuss how we can push this through.

Q14. [906241] **Mary Glindon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): We have heard far too much lately about ministerial posteriors and little about prosperity for the country. Even in these dying days of a lame-duck Government, will the Prime Minister stop prevaricating and subscribe to the Horizon programme for the sake of vital British science, innovation and cancer research?

The Prime Minister: This Government are investing record sums in British science and research and development, because we believe that is critical to a brighter economic future and spreading opportunity.

Our priority and preference is to associate to Horizon, but we want to make sure that that is on terms that are right both for the British taxpayer and for British science and research. I can commit to the hon. Lady that we have been extensively involved in discussions. I hope to be able to conclude those successfully and, when we do, I hope she will be the first to stand up and congratulate the Government.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): September is Childhood Cancer Awareness Month, but it also marks two years since the death of my constituent Sophie Fairall. She was only 10 years old. Every day in the UK, 10 young people will be diagnosed with cancer, and two of those will not survive. Those who do face a lifetime of side effects from treatments that are just not designed for small bodies. When will the Prime Minister publish a childhood cancer action plan?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. I extend my sympathies to her constituent's family, as she raised. She is right to continue campaigning in this important area. I hope she will understand that I cannot pre-empt the specific contents of the strategy, but I can tell her that it will draw on previous work, including submissions from childhood cancer charities and stakeholders to our recent calls for evidence. Of course, we want to hear from them to highlight and get a sense of the issues that she specifically raised, but I will ensure that we write to her to give her a sense of the timing.

Q15. [906242] **Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): Every year the SNP Scottish Government mitigate against the cruellest of Westminster policies by spending £84 million on supporting hard-working families against the brutal bedroom tax and over £6.2 million on covering the two-child benefit cap. Astonishingly, we have learned over the summer that the Leader of the Opposition is an enthusiastic supporter of these Tory cruel welfare policies, with U-turn after U-turn from the Labour party. Given that the Tories and Labour are two cheeks of the same arse—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"]—offering no change, no vision and no hope, does the Prime Minister agree that the only way Scottish voters can rid themselves—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not going to have us both stand up; one of us is going to give way, and it will not be me. Let us think about language. Let us be more temperate and make sure that the pride of this Parliament shines through—that certainly will not be by using such language.

Chris Law: I am happy to change the offending word to "bottom". Given that the Tories and Labour are two cheeks of the same bottom, offering no change, no vision and no hope, does the Prime Minister agree that the only way for Scottish voters to rid themselves of these heinous policies is to vote for the SNP to leave Westminster forever?

The Prime Minister: Obviously not. I think the thrust of that question was directed at the Leader of the Opposition rather than me, and I would not want to get in the middle of that. What I can say is that we want to ensure a welfare system that is compassionate and looks after the most vulnerable in our society, while supporting

into work those who can do so, because that is also fair for everyone else and British taxpayers. I believe that is a system that we are achieving. Right now, we are

providing people in Scotland with thousands of pounds of support to help with energy bills and everything else, and we will continue to do so.

Points of Order

12.52 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister said that my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition had never raised the issue of school building safety before, and he specifically mentioned his education speech earlier this summer. That is categorically untrue. I wondered if the Prime Minister wanted to correct the record. My right hon. and learned Friend mentioned it as part of that speech, in fact. It has also been raised by the Opposition more than 180 times in this House, and was the subject of an Opposition day debate, in the name of the Leader of the Opposition, in May. I am sure that the Prime Minister would not want to give the House the wrong impression.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady has raised the point of order quite correctly, and has corrected the record herself. I am sure that the Prime Minister will be notified of the point she has raised. We will leave it for now and see what happens.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I seek your guidance on how hon. Members may hold energy companies to account for their shortcomings with their business customers? I have been in contact with EDF Energy for a number of months over its multiple failures that have severely impacted The Circle, a wonderful community interest company in Easterhouse. EDF's multiple failures to correct the mistakes are incredibly worrying. I seek your guidance on how a Member of this House might be able to use its procedures to hold energy companies to account.

Mr Speaker: It is disappointing to hear about EDF and the way that it is not responding. As an experienced Member, I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows that the Table Office can advise him on the various ways that he can pursue EDF on this matter.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During Prime Minister's questions, the Leader of the Opposition accused the Prime Minister of spending taxpayers' money to refurbish "Tory offices". I believe the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) was referring to the Department for Education, a Whitehall, Government, non-partisan civil service office. Will you, Mr Speaker, ask the Leader of the Opposition to come back to correct the record?

Mr Speaker: I do not think I need to be told by the hon. Gentleman what I have to do. He has certainly put it on the record, and it will have been heard by the Opposition. You were right to raise a point of order, Mr Stafford, but do not start instructing me on what I need to do. We will leave that there at this stage.

Automated External Defibrillators (Housing Developments)

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

12.45 pm

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the provision of automated external defibrillators in all new housing developments of ten dwellings or more; to require developers to provide funding for the maintenance of such defibrillators for a period of ten years after installation; and for connected purposes.

My Bill aims to increase the number of automated external defibrillators by ensuring that, in future, they are an essential feature of every new housing development. That is a vital step in our endeavour to increase cardiac arrest survival rates. Crucially, my Bill also requires funding for the continued maintenance of defibrillators. First, I will outline the scope of my Bill and its links to important debates that the Commons has had on defibrillators. Secondly, I will highlight the scientific evidence from around the world that overwhelmingly supports the introduction of my Bill, and I will present the important argument for a maintenance provision in the Bill.

I am grateful to Dave Bowling, a community first responder in my constituency, for providing the inspiration for the Bill, which, as this speech will demonstrate, has the potential to save many lives. The powerful benefits of defibrillators have already been highlighted in Parliament. My Bill follows the 2018 Defibrillators (Availability) Bill, brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), and the 2023 Automated External Defibrillators (Public Access) Bill brought forward by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Additionally, the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) recently led an important debate on public access to defibrillators, and a sponsor of my Bill, my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), has been advocating for greater uptake of AEDs through his leadership of the all-party parliamentary group on defibrillators. I also note with appreciation that the Leader of the House of Commons, my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), was the first MP to call for all MPs to complete defibrillator training. Such discussions and endorsements in Parliament are of great value in increasing public awareness of defibrillators.

I acknowledge the very positive steps that have been taken to provide defibrillators in every school and on our high streets, and the funding that the Prime Minister mentioned earlier, but the Bill targets an area that is yet to be addressed: private residential homes. It is crucial to note that in the UK, most out-of-hospital cardiac arrests—70%, according to the Resuscitation Council UK—occur in the home. However, when I looked at my constituency and others on the "Defib finder" website, it was apparent that defibrillators are predominantly installed in non-residential areas. That is a problem. In Sweden, researchers have found that a person is three times more likely to survive a cardiac arrest in public than at home. That statistic could be mirrored in the UK, which is why I am calling for a legal requirement to ensure that all new housing developments have a defibrillator—an essential piece of life-saving equipment.

[Stephen Metcalfe]

When cardiac arrests happen, it is crucial that a defibrillator be nearby. According to a study by Sarkisian et al., the survival rate for cardiac arrests decreases by 10% for every additional 100 metres between the patient and the defib. It is therefore concerning that, according to a recent study by Burgoine et al.—many Members will have read about it in the papers last week—the median distance of a publicly accessible defibrillator from any given postcode in Great Britain is 726 metres.

When someone has a cardiac arrest, their heart stops, and it is a race against time to ensure that oxygen continues to travel to their brain. Cardiopulmonary resuscitation—chest compressions with rescue breaths—is essential for maintaining the flow of blood and oxygen during this time. However, the use of a defibrillator is the only method that can seriously improve survival rates, by shocking the heart and causing it to resume its normal rhythm. That restores the flow of blood and oxygen to the brain. If a defibrillator is used before an ambulance arrives, survival rates from cardiac arrest increase from less than 10% to more than 70%.

Given that there are 60,000 cardiac arrests in the UK every year, it is crystal clear that my Bill is necessary to increase the number of defibrillators in private residential areas, and I hope that this will not be a controversial issue for the House. Some may suggest that the Bill will impose an additional financial burden on housing developers, but the cost of a defibrillator is small in relation to the entire budget of a housing project: just over £1,000. The Bill will also empower residents to learn about defibrillators, and to know where they are and how to use them. Everyone should know what a defibrillator is and, hopefully, where to find one.

The second part of my Bill requires developers to provide funding for these new defibrillators for 10 years after their installation. If defibrillators are to work and

to save lives, they must be maintained. So what maintenance is required? First, there must be an electricity supply to maintain the temperature of the defibrillator; this protects the battery life of the device. Secondly, batteries need to be replaced after four to six years. Replacement batteries typically cost just £300. Thirdly, electrode pads need to be replaced after two years. Five replacement pads cost only £360. As for who would carry out the maintenance, I believe that a number of organisations would be well placed to visit each defibrillator in an area once every two years for that purpose—for example, the fire service; the first responder network, including the local ambulance service; or even, perhaps, the local authority. Funding for the maintenance could well be achieved through a section 106 agreement between housing developers and local authorities.

My Bill has two important aspects: the provision of a defibrillator in every new housing development consisting of more than 10 dwellings, and the provision of 10 years' maintenance funding, all for an additional cost of about £2,500, or £250 per property. That is a small price to pay for immediate access to a lifesaving defibrillator. The scientific evidence overwhelmingly emphasises the impact that the Bill could have, and I hope that the House recognises that and decides to take action to improve cardiac arrest survival rates.

Let me end with Dave Bowling's call to action: "defibrillation for the nation".

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Stephen Metcalfe, Anna Firth, Mr Mark Francois, Jackie Doyle-Price, Carol Monaghan, Jonathan Gullis, Sir Chris Bryant and Giles Watling present the Bill.

Stephen Metcalfe accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 360).

Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill

Consideration of Lords message

Clause 18

IMMUNITY FROM PROSECUTION

12.55 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendments 44D, 44E, 44F, 44G, 44H and 44J.

Let me begin by reminding the House that the Government have sought to make a realistic assessment of what we can best deliver for families more than a quarter of a century after the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday agreement, nearly 30 years since the first ceasefires, and well over 50 years since the troubles began. The backdrop is that current mechanisms for addressing legacy matters work for only a very small number of people, rather than the overwhelming majority, and established criminal justice processes are increasingly unlikely to deliver outcomes that people desire, especially in respect of prosecutions.

We have only one issue left to debate today: conditional immunity. The purpose of this legislation is to give people more information in a shorter timeframe than is possible with the current mechanisms. We do that by creating an effective information recovery process that relies on a conditional immunity model. I attended a decent chunk of the debate in the House of Lords yesterday, and although I am sympathetic to the intent behind Lords amendment 44E, which is to give family members a role in deciding whether immunity should or should not be granted, immunity risks undermining the effectiveness of these provisions and the principal aim of information recovery. For example, the “public interest” consideration element in condition D would lead to uncertainty about the circumstances in which immunity will be granted, undermining the clear and transparent approach that we have developed over time. If we are to ensure that the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery can obtain as much information for families as possible, we need to ensure that the right incentives are in place for individuals to come forward to provide that information.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I appreciate that the Secretary of State—whom, by the way, I greatly respect—has come here to try to deliver the Bill as it is, but may I make this point to him? A great many people out there have lost loved ones over the years—we all know who they are—and on every occasion, they seek justice. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), even if there is only a candle of light of a possibility that someday, those who had murdered someone’s loved one would be held accountable for it, that is what we need. Let me say, with respect, that today the Government are extinguishing that light for all those who have lost loved ones. There are many people in the Chamber today, and in the Public Gallery, who have lost loved ones. On behalf of all those families, I implore the Secretary of State and the Government to think very carefully about the direction

that they are taking, because the families’ right to justice is being extinguished, and that cannot bode well for the future.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point, for the way he has raised it, and indeed for the numerous conversations we have had on these matters outside this place and within it. He knows the answer that I am going to give him. I will never, and can never, put myself in the shoes of the people who have lost someone. I just cannot. However, I can see a process that has worked for only a very few people, considering the quantum of people who were affected by the troubles and who lost people. Indeed, the chances of getting justice for them are dwindling all the time.

The Government have come to the conclusion that this is the right way forward because we hope that we can, in good time, at least get some information recovered for those families that ask for it, and also through other elements of the Bill that are not the subject of this package of amendments. If someone misleads the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery, there are criminal processes involving perjury and a whole host of criminal investigations that can take place. A whole host of things have changed that I hope will allow lots of information to be recovered in quick time for families.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): The Secretary of State says he cannot put himself in the shoes of the victims, but he could listen to them. Can he tell us how many or what percentage of the victims he has met have shown support for this piece of legislation?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Very few have shown support for this legislation, but I have met many, as has my Lords Minister, Lord Caine. In fact, part of the process of changing the Bill has come from those conversations. I understand that lots of families do not want this Bill, but the question then is: if not this Bill, then what? *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) says “Stormont House”, but he knows that Stormont House did not have cross-party agreement at the time and that the Ulster Unionist party did not agree to it—

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP) *rose—*

Chris Heaton-Harris: I happily give way. Please correct me.

Claire Hanna: Would the Minister acknowledge that it did have cross-party support—the Ulster Unionists deferred on one small matter—and that it was recommitted to by his Government and the Irish Government as recently as January 2020?

Chris Heaton-Harris: And it did not move forward because of the different political issues that came about.

Colum Eastwood: The Minister made this very point at an event that I was at at the weekend, but it was Chatham House rules so I am not allowed to talk about it. He puts forward the argument that the parties just could not agree, but I was involved in many of those discussions and I can tell him that the British Government dragged their feet month after month around the issue of onward disclosure. That is what happened, and it is important to put that on the record. The vast majority

[Colum Eastwood]

of political parties and victims' groups in Northern Ireland supported Stormont House but the British Government just did not want to do it. That is why it did not get delivered.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am afraid I do not quite believe that that is the case. However, the British Government have committed to full disclosure to the ICRIR, which allows for a huge amount of information to be put forward in those circumstances and the possibility of ensuring that the commissioner can obtain as much information as possible from families.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Minister said that if families were to have a say on whether immunity should be granted, it would undermine the whole thrust of the Bill, but the point of the Bill is to ensure that people and families who have been hurt, traumatised and damaged by what happened as a result of terrorist activity in Northern Ireland over 30 years have their say. Surely the best way of giving them justice, after they have heard what the circumstances of the case were, what the attitude of the individual is and what can be disclosed, is to at least let them have the final say on whether they feel that the individual concerned should be granted immunity.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point. The many amendments to this Bill throughout the last year have included measures on how families should be engaged with and how their views should be heard throughout the process. To ensure that the commission can obtain as much information for families as possible, we need to ensure that the right incentives are in place for individuals to come forward and provide that information. The possibility that eligible individuals who co-operate fully with the commission could then be prevented from obtaining immunity from prosecution is highly likely to act as a significant disincentive for individuals to disclose that information.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): This was never going to be an easy issue, or an easy Bill. If it was easy, it would have been done many years ago. What the Government are proposing may be right, or it may be part right and part wrong. I certainly think that giving those survivors and their families a right to veto would be the wrong step to take, so the Government are right on that. However, I think the House will find comfort in the fact that the Secretary of State will keep the progress of the enactment under review, and if there is abuse or things that are wrong, we can revisit it, tidy it up and make it work better. This cannot be seen as a closed chapter, job done. Rather, it is the start of a new process—quite experimental in some ways—of learning from other people's experiences. If we have that comfort that this is amendable and reviewable, it might help to assuage some, if not all, the concerns.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the Chairman of the Select Committee for his point. He will know that other amendments I have tabled have tried to make this body as independent as it can possibly be. I am sure he will have taken great heart from the appointment of the chief commissioner designate, Sir Declan Morgan, and from the comments he has been making about how he

intends to go about his business. He is engaging widely, even at this point, and will do so even further when the Bill gets Royal Assent and becomes an Act. Just in the practice of Sir Declan in putting the flesh on the framework that we are building here for the commission, I think my hon. Friend will see that there are lots of opportunities for it to do exactly what he wishes it to do.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): This is understandably an emotional and difficult topic, and it is one that means a lot to me, having served as a Parliamentary Private Secretary to the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Sir Brandon Lewis), and also having loved ones who lived through the troubles on either side of the border. The discussions were difficult and I want to give my support to the Secretary of State on this. If there is a threat of prosecution down the line, it will be the families of British soldiers and the families particularly in Unionist communities who will not get the answers they rightly deserve. It will disincentivise people from coming forward and presenting evidence.

Even though justice might not be served in a court, there will at least be answers to the questions that family members have been asking for a long time. It will offer some small hope of reconciliation for those families if they can finally get the truth about what happened and who was involved, in order to allow Northern Ireland to heal and move on. I have engaged regularly with members of the Northern Irish community, and they want to talk about education and about creating more high-skilled, high-wage jobs. They are desperate to see prosperity for their great country, and those are the things that that nation wants to move on to look forward to, rather than continuously looking backwards.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my hon. Friend for his point and for his committed work in my Department. I was not there at the time, but I know of it. I understand the point that he makes. Over the past year, we have endeavoured through amendments to make the Bill very much focused on all victims of the troubles, so that all victims can, if they choose to do so, contact the commission and start a process that will hopefully get them some information in relatively quick time.

Sammy Wilson: We have recently had an example of a Roman Catholic priest who was involved in IRA activities. When talking about his role, he said that his only regret was that his efforts were not more effective in killing people. If that kind of evidence is elicited—if people come forward and show no remorse and no regret, and offer no comfort to victims—does the Secretary of State really think victims will feel any better? Would not giving them the opportunity to say, “In the light of that man's attitude, I do not believe he should be granted immunity,” be a better way of ensuring that justice is at least seen to be done for those people?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Unbelievably evil things were done in the course of the troubles. Unbelievably hideous acts were committed, and none of us can change that. As I said at the beginning of my contribution, it has not been possible to give justice to a huge number of those families even today, even after the passage of all that time and even after numerous investigations in some cases. This Bill tries to get some information to families

who contact the commission to request it, so they can better understand the situation. It will not change anything that happened in the past—it simply cannot.

Colum Eastwood: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way again. The premise of his argument and some of the arguments we have heard from Members on those Benches, which are sometimes extremely condescending to victims who have been going through this for many decades, is that people will come forward with the truth if we grant immunity. Well, there is one glaring example that proves that is totally wrong. During the Bloody Sunday inquiry, the soldiers were granted immunity within the context of the inquiry. One after another, they lied through their teeth, and that has been proven by an international public inquiry. With the disappeared, again, IRA people were provided immunity within the context of the organisation that was looking to find those bodies, and we still have bodies out there that have not been found because those people did not come forward and tell the truth even when they were granted immunity.

The lie that is being used to sell this Bill is just that: a lie. It is patently untrue and it will not do anything to give people the truth and justice they desire.

Chris Heaton-Harris: The hon. Gentleman characterises it completely incorrectly. There are no guarantees that the Bill will bring information forward but, as I tried to outline, very little new information has come to light that has led to new cases. Very few people have been able to receive justice. He mentions the point that, in the past, some people might have misled a judge-led inquiry. Well, that is perjury, and perjury is now part of this Bill. The Bill has changed a huge amount over the past year, and it is worthy of support.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): This may well be our last chance to discuss the Bill in this Chamber. May I ask the Secretary of State to reflect on the fact that virtually every independent human rights expert including, most notably, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, which has statutory functions, does not believe that the Bill is human rights compliant? Even Sir Declan Morgan, who has been appointed to head up the ICIR, could not give a categorical answer to that question in a recent newspaper interview. Indeed, it is anticipated that a whole series of cases will need to be brought forward to clear up the issues around human rights compliance.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I understand that point and, again, that is the purpose of all the amendments we have made. The hon. Gentleman will know that I was not comfortable with the Bill that I inherited because, as there would be a gap in investigations, I did not believe it could be article 2 compliant. Amendments have been introduced that completely change that and I believe that the Bill is now compliant, but that will undoubtedly be tested. Only when it is tested and the results come forward can anybody actually say that the Bill is article 2 compliant, as Government lawyers truly believe it is.

Claire Hanna: The Secretary of State was unhappy with the Bill he inherited, which is the context of the amendments and changes that have been made to this Bill. Has he consulted with the chief commissioner-designate

on the Lords amendments he is rejecting today? If the chief commissioner-designate was consulted, did he agree to reject the amendments?

1.15 pm

Chris Heaton-Harris: I determined not to speak to the chief commissioner-designate, so that I could maintain his independence when the Bill is enacted.

Jim Shannon: In several of the Secretary of State's answers to questions from Opposition Members, he has said, "If there is extra evidence". Has he or the British Government had the opportunity to speak to the Irish Republic Government about their role? I believe the Irish Republic Government, through the Garda Síochána, have an evidence base on the murders that were carried out by the IRA along the border. I am very conscious of Chief Superintendent Harry Breen and Bob Buchanan in 1989, Lexie Cummings in 1982 and Ian Sproule in 1991. The people who did that escaped across the border, and the Garda Síochána has indicated—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am very conscious of time. You are down to speak, and you have made your speech already. Other people need to get in. This is a very important issue, and I want to make sure that people can make their speeches.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Forgive me, Mr Speaker; I was trying to take as many interventions as possible.

Mr Speaker: I know. We all know that Mr Shannon is very good, but it is the amount of time. Interventions have to be short and punchy, not speeches. He is going to make a speech later.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I can assure the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that I have been speaking to the Irish Government about elements of what he mentioned.

The commission will grant immunity from prosecution only if an individual provides an account that is true to the best of their knowledge and belief. We have developed a robust test for immunity, in which their account must be tested against any information that the commission holds. If an individual does not provide a truthful account of their actions that could be passed to families, or if they do not participate in the immunity process at all, immunity will not be granted and they would remain liable to prosecution should evidence exist. Where a prosecution takes place, and should a conviction be secured, an individual will not be eligible for the early release scheme under the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998. Again, that is a result of amendments made in this House.

Similarly, although I acknowledge the sentiment behind introducing licence conditions under Lords amendment 44E, I respectfully suggest that the Government have sought to address these issues through amendments that were adopted on Report in the other place. These amendments send a clear message that, once immunity is granted, individuals who are convicted of offences that could impede reconciliation will lose that immunity. In the Government's view, this approach strikes the right balance between providing sufficient certainty as to the effect of a grant of immunity necessary to

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

encourage participation and ensuring that there are appropriate consequences for those whose behaviour after being granted immunity is not compatible with the fundamental aims of the Bill.

The alternative proposed by the Opposition would not support an effective information recovery process, and I therefore ask that the House joins me in disagreeing to amendments 44D, 44E, 44F, 44G, 44H and 44J.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): May I take this opportunity to welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) to the Front-Bench team, and to express my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for all the service she gave during her time as part of the shadow Northern Ireland team?

As the House will be aware, we do not support this Bill, but I do not understand why the Secretary of State is seeking to overturn the amendments tabled by Lord Murphy and passed in the other place yesterday. I listened very carefully to the arguments advanced by the Secretary of State, but I do not think they stand up, because the Lords amendments would not take away the commission's ability to issue immunity to an individual who comes forward and gives truthful evidence about what happened. Lords amendment 44E is not a veto, but it would allow the families of those who were killed or seriously injured in the troubles to have some voice in the process—I understand that relatives of those who were murdered are with us in the Gallery, and they are still seeking justice.

Let me turn to the other provisions, relating to licence conditions that would apply to the person seeking immunity. I acknowledge what the Secretary of State just said about other changes having been made to the Bill, but these provisions seem very sensible and reasonable to me. I include in that the requirement that the individual in question should not approach or otherwise communicate with a victim, in the case of an injury, or with a victim's family, in the case of a death, unless they consent. So we will vote against the Government's motion to disagree with the Lords amendments today.

The Secretary of State has talked quite a bit about a disincentive to people coming forward, but I say to him that it is not entirely clear that immunity will achieve the purpose that the Government have for it. Given that every other means of justice is to be closed down, and given that the commission appears to have a lifespan of only five years, those who have committed dreadful crimes only need to sit it out. I say to the Secretary of State that if that were to happen and after the five years are over those individuals start to talk about, boast about or write books about what they have done, how will he explain to the families of those they murdered why the Government allowed that situation to arise? That would be the consequence of taking away from people, as this Bill does, the means of justice, however hard, however long, however uncertain. I acknowledge the point that the Secretary of State made about that.

This is the last occasion on which we will debate this highly controversial legislation, which concerns how we come to terms with the terrible legacy of violence and brutality during the troubles in a way that enables those

most affected—the families—finally to know what happened to the person they loved and to ensure that justice is done; to hold those responsible to account. This is the first time I have talked about this, given that I was appointed only on Monday, but I recognise how hard this is and I acknowledge the changes that the Secretary of State has made to the Bill during its passage, including his comment that when he inherited it he was not happy with it. However, he must accept that this legislation does not command the confidence of the people to whom he is trying to offer reassurance and comfort.

The most important word in the title of this Bill is “reconciliation”. We all want that to happen, but the Bill has self-evidently not achieved its aim, because all the communities in Northern Ireland are clearly not reconciled to its contents. It is so striking to see the extent to which the Government have failed to win support for their approach. The list of people and organisations opposed to this Bill is frankly astonishing: all of the political parties in Northern Ireland; the Churches in Northern Ireland; victims' groups; the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission; the former Victims' Commissioner; the Irish Government; the Council of Europe; and the United Nations. Most extraordinary of all, it is reported that the person who has been appointed as the commissioner-designate, the highly respected Sir Declan Morgan, said recently that he would expect legal action by the families of victims of the troubles to try to challenge the Bill on whether it is compliant with the European convention on human rights.

That is the scale of the coalition that the Government have managed to range against themselves, but instead of reflecting on that, their approach has been to put their head down and plough on regardless. That is why, for all the Government's good intentions, they have failed to win public confidence, even though the Government said in 2018:

“In order to build consensus on workable proposals that have widespread support we must listen to the concerns of victims, survivors and other interested parties.”

Doing the wrong thing is not a justification for this Bill, and if there is one lesson we must by now have learned about how to make progress in Northern Ireland, it is that it can only be achieved patiently, slowly and carefully, so as to build a consensus. I am sorry to say that the Bill does not do that and it will not achieve the purpose Ministers claim for it. That is why we are committed, as the Opposition, to repeal it, if we get the opportunity.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I am well aware that time is limited; you will be pleased to hear, Mr Speaker, that so too is my capacity for repeating arguments that I have made many times previously. My party believes that this Bill is wrong in principle and that in practice it will not achieve the aims that the Secretary of State believes, no doubt with great sincerity, that it will. We will therefore be joining the official Opposition in voting to support the Lords amendments.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I am grateful for the contributions made by Opposition Members thus far. A number of comments have been made this

afternoon that relate more to Second Reading than to the stage we are at. It should come as no surprise to those in the Chamber to hear that to us this is an irredeemable piece of legislation. Even though we were highlighting in this Chamber on Second Reading and so on the areas where significant flaws were ultimately going to prove fatal to support for this Bill, the Government entrenched themselves. On a number of discrete issues, they committed in this democratically elected Chamber, where they ignored our requests, that they would proceed with such amendments in the Lords. I find that unsatisfactory, although I recognise that my colleagues in the Lords continue to push on those issues. With Lords Dodds principally among them, they have ensured that some of the commitments given have been honoured. However, that does not change the fact that this is a fundamental assault on justice, with the erosion of hope for victims and of the opportunity to get the answers they seek and the outcome they desire. Those things have been snuffed out by a Government who have entrenched themselves, and I greatly regret that.

This afternoon we have an opportunity, with discrete and sensible amendments before us, as the shadow Secretary of State has said. They were tabled by the Labour party in the House of Lords, and were advocated and supported by Members across the other place yesterday afternoon. This is an opportunity for the Government to salvage at least some appropriate involvement for victims, whereby they can have their say and a sense of the outcome that they seek.

A contribution was made yesterday by Lord Eames, and it is worth repeating. He said:

“Yes, there have been attempts to bring the concept of victimhood into the legislation that is proposed, and yes, the Government can claim that they have made efforts, but, in God’s name, I ask your Lordships to consider the overall impetus of what changes have been made to try to recognise the needs of victims and their families, and of those who, in years to come, when they read what has been said, attempted and failed to be produced, will find it incredulous to understand that the Mother of Parliaments has ignored their crying.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 5 September 2023; Vol. 832, c. 343.]

Those words were worth repeating this afternoon because Lord Eames is somebody who has led the Church of Ireland but is in this Parliament as a peacemaker, and who went through an ill-fated attempt to reconcile issues of legacy in the past, in a consultative report with Denis Bradley in 2009. Within this Parliament and within our society, he is somebody who probably buried more people in Northern Ireland during the troubles than anyone else. When he exhorts in such clear terms that there is an opportunity finally for the Government, at this last gasp, to show some recognition of the pain, trauma, harm and pursuit of justice that victims show, the fact that this Government would not accept it is a great shame.

The list of organisations has been given—it was given by a former Secretary of State, Lord Murphy, yesterday in the House of Lords and by the shadow Secretary of State here today—showing the lack of support for the legislation. We will go through the Lobby this afternoon to register yet again our disappointment at a failed opportunity by this Government, who are more focused on what they can get out of this Bill as they campaign for the forthcoming election than on solving the intractable issues that have plagued our society for so long.

1.30 pm

Stephen Farry: To start with the specific amendments before us, the Government’s approach, right to this eleventh hour—five minutes to midnight in terms of the Bill—reinforces the premise behind the Bill. Immunity is the central foundation stone on which this flawed Bill has been designed and taken forward, and the immunity clause goes to the heart of why there is no confidence in the legislation and why it has been rejected by so many stakeholders, most notably victims groups. That opposition spans the entire political spectrum in Northern Ireland.

Reference has been made to the history around this issue. I do not want to dwell on that overly, but there is a notion that the Stormont House agreement was not agreed to and was in some way flawed, and that we needed an alternative. Stormont House was agreed by virtually every political party and there were efforts made to implement it, but beyond the political parties it had the confidence of victims groups and the approval of independent human rights experts, so it was the basis of moving forward.

As has been said, as recently as “New Decade, New Approach”, Stormont House has explicitly been the policy of this Government. Within three months from the launch of “New Decade, New Approach”, we had, in effect, a handbrake turn, with a written ministerial statement by one of the Secretary of State’s predecessors, the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Sir Brandon Lewis). It was very clear that the immunity concept, alongside the Conservative party manifesto, was driving that, so the whole premise of the Bill is driven by the politics of the Conservative party, not the needs of Northern Ireland. That is the fundamental reason why the Bill will never be seen as legitimate in any sense in Northern Ireland. Further, I do not understand the logic of a Secretary of State saying that Stormont House does not have full support, so we cannot proceed on that basis, and then, by extension, introducing a Bill that has no support from any political party or victims group in Northern Ireland. That seems utterly nonsensical to me.

I will not reiterate the point I made about human rights compliance, but I acknowledge that the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) echoed and reinforced the point that we will see legal challenges to the legislation.

Finally, I welcome what the shadow Secretary of State said about the repeal of the legislation. If we see a change of Government after the next election, I hope that will be a priority for the incoming Government.

Colum Eastwood: There are a lot of things that get me angry in this job, but this has got me more angry than anything I have ever had to deal with. The people sitting on the Benches occupied by Members representing Northern Ireland’s constituencies have had to deal with, get to know and work with the victims of our terrible past for decades. Frankly, I am embarrassed today, as I do not know what I am going to say to them when I speak to them after the debate, because as a whole—as a body politic—we have failed them.

We have a peace process, we have peace and lots of us have been able to move on, but we have left a very significant cohort of people behind, and we are rubber stamping that today. Some people will walk through the

[Colum Eastwood]

Lobby coldly, without having the names of the victims ringing in their heads. I have their names going around my head right now—I have put many of them on record in this Chamber during the passage of the Bill. I am deeply ashamed that we are doing this today.

There is a pretence in the proposal for the Bill that somehow the British Government were not an actor at all in the conflict in Northern Ireland. That is patently untrue. They say that local political parties in Northern Ireland are just squabbling, cannot come up with any answers or deal with the problem. That is patently untrue. We came up with the answer, which was Stormont House. The reason it was not delivered is that the British Government dragged their feet and changed their policy after “New Decade, New Approach”. That is a fact.

I really hope that the Irish Government listen to the calls by some of us to take this UK Government to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, because the Bill is an affront to human rights and article 2. Every single expert I have spoken to agrees with me on that, and every single victim agrees with me on that as well.

The Secretary of State used the phrase “effective information recovery process” a lot of times. “Effective information recovery process”? I can take him to families today whose children—14 and 15 years old—were shot in the troubles and their cases have been closed by this Government until 2064 and 2065. Those people tell us they want an “effective information recovery process”, but the Government are denying victims “effective information recovery”, so that tells me that the Bill is based on a lie. It is an attempt by this Government and dark forces within the security apparatus of this Government to close down access to truth and justice.

We all understand that justice will be hard to get for many families, but most of those families have not even had any truth. The process of investigation gets them truths. I can take Members to loads of families today who never once even met a police officer, even though a loved one was murdered. Does anybody here believe that the IRA are going to come forward and tell us who bombed a particular pub or who shot a particular person? It is utter nonsense.

This is an attempt to close down access to the truth and it is an affront to democracy. Immunity? It is impunity, giving people a licence to murder people on the streets of Derry, Belfast, Newry and across Northern Ireland, and also on the streets of London. I do not understand how any politician can stand and look at the faces of crying victims and tell them that this is the right thing to do. I am ashamed that this is happening today.

Let me say one thing to end: I know these people. They have had to struggle for decade after decade. This will not be the end for them and we will be with them in support, right to the end.

Jim Shannon: I wish to add a few words. I will not be labouring too long in the Chamber, but it is important to make some comments in relation to where we are, as I again find myself in a position where I cannot support what the Government have put forward. While some Members on the Government Benches try to apologise

and condition their support for the Bill, Members on these Benches, including those from my party and our spokesperson, my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), as well as Members representing other parties, including the hon. Members for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) and for North Down (Stephen Farry), have put forward their comments very clearly.

I have many concerns over the processes in place for victims and the fact that there are not enough answers. There will be ongoing investigations, but will any of those investigations be into collusion over the border? In my intervention on the Secretary of State earlier I referred to discussions that the Secretary of State and the United Kingdom Government may have had with the Republic of Ireland in relation to collusion in investigations, which in some cases involved some members of the Garda Síochána, and to the fact that the Republic of Ireland gave sanctuary to IRA murderers who escaped across the borders. Those are issues that some of my constituents wish to know about.

In his reply, the Secretary of State said that he has had discussions with the Republic of Ireland in relation to those matters, but has the Republic of Ireland responded, given evidence or investigated in the way it should have done?

Sammy Wilson: The Government of the Irish Republic, again interfering in the affairs of Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom, have threatened to go to the European court on this issue. Does my hon. Friend agree with me, given how tarnished they are in regard to legacy, that whether we agree or disagree with the legislation that is being brought forward, this is an internal UK matter and should be dealt with internally, through the processes within the UK, not by an interfering Irish Government?

Jim Shannon: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. He has put on record very clearly his point of view, and it is one to which many of us here subscribe.

Let me return to the points that I was trying to make about the Secretary of State's reply. Have those discussions taken place? Has the evidential base been gathered? Have the accusations of collusion between the Garda Síochána and the IRA been considered? There was the murder of Chief Superintendent Harry Breen and Superintendent Bob Buchanan in a car bomb on the border in 1989. The information that we have been made aware of indicates that details were passed to the IRA on what time they would be crossing the border. That is collusion. That is an evidential base for what happened. That information should be brought forward by the Republic of Ireland Government and conveyed to the Secretary of State and the Government here. There are many other such cases. For example, the murderers of Lexie Cummings in 1982 escaped across the border. The murderers of Ian Sproule in 1981 escaped across the border, and, again, the murderers of my own cousin, Kenneth Smyth, escaped across the border.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. As this was raised in an earlier intervention, it would be interesting to say to the House that someone came forward and volunteered information, saying that they had been involved in the IRA campaign, and yet they have never served one day either in court or in prison for that. They were questioned in 1988 and

denied the allegation, but as recently as 2019 they made a full admission of their involvement in IRA activities. The case of the Hyde Park bomb, which saw 11 people killed and 51 injured, was never brought to court in relation to that. That was somebody who came forward recently and made that admission.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that matter. He has clearly outlined an evidential base, which has to be part of this process. Unfortunately, though, with this Bill that process does not continue in the way that we hoped it would.

I wish very quickly to speak to the Lords amendments. They have established minimum criminal justice standards for a “review” along the lines of Operation Kenova. The amendments would require the Secretary of State to make regulations prescribing the standards to which reviews by the Independent Commission for Reconciliation & Information Recovery are carried out, including what measures should be used to ensure that reviews comply sufficiently with the obligations under the European convention on human rights. The shadow Secretary of State, whom I welcome to his place, referred to that specifically in his contribution. I was very encouraged by his comments here today—I think we all were—and look forward to constructive engagement with him as we move forward. What is also covered is whether as much information as possible should be gathered by reviews in relation to death or harmful conduct, and whether all evidential opportunities should be explored by reviews. Victims must be consulted, and regulations can be changed if reviews are conducted in a way not envisaged.

That is what the Lords amendments were hoping to achieve. It is disappointing to me personally and to all of us who represent Northern Ireland that that has not been fully considered by the Government. It is regrettable that the Government have resisted efforts to embed minimum criminal justice standards at the heart of how the ICRIR conducts reviews. They seem intent not only on narrowing the legal routes, but weakening investigative standards in those aspects that remain. It is hard not to reach the conclusion that the distinction made between “review” and “investigation” in the context of the Bill is more about drawing a line under the past with minimal fuss in the shortest timeframe possible, than about actually securing the answers and information that the victims and their families deserve and crave.

In conclusion, it grieves me to stand against the Government on these issues, but, on behalf of the victims, I wish to say very clearly that those in the Public Gallery today expect to see all those who perpetrated and carried out crimes to be held accountable. That is not happening. The unfortunate thing for all of us here—those in the Public Gallery who have lost loved ones, we in this Chamber who have lost loved ones and for all of us who represent Northern Ireland—is that this is a retrograde step. It extinguishes very clearly the hope for justice that we all want for those people who lost their lives to the troubles.

Chris Heaton-Harris: With the leave of the House, I will answer a couple of the points that have been raised. I am grateful to all hon. Members for their contributions in the debate today. I know that the time that I have is relatively short, so I shall try to keep to it.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was just speaking I was reminded of a question that I received from my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Jane Stevenson) in the second but last Northern Ireland Office questions. She was approached by a constituent who was after information about what had happened to one of their loved ones. So there are people out there who will try to find, and do find, information about their loved one if it can possibly be done. The fact is that if people do not co-operate, they will not be granted immunity and therefore they will remain liable to prosecution, and that will mean using all the police powers at the new body's disposal. The Government's position is that we still feel that the prospect of successful prosecutions is increasingly unlikely, but, none the less, that prospect remains.

1.45 pm

If I may, I will correct one thing that the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said—it is a straightforward correction and is not meant in any political way. It is not correct to state that the ICRIR has a lifespan of five years. The commission will be wound up by the Secretary of State at the time via affirmative resolution only once it has discharged all its functions as set out under clause 2, so its lifespan could be quite a bit longer than five years. I just thought that I would share that.

I do recognise that this is a hugely difficult Bill and a hugely difficult task—an unbelievably difficult task—which is reflected in the number of valiant attempts made to address the issue since the Good Friday agreement.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Secretary of State is outlining the difficulty surrounding this entire process. Given the convoluted, protracted nature of this for such a long time and given what inevitably will happen when this passes as it will, it will end up in the High Court. Does he understand that this will be an entirely convoluted, academic process that will end up nowhere?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am afraid that I do not.

I was saying that a number of valiant attempts have been made to address this issue since the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. As I have reminded the House in the past, in one debate that I attended with some of the women who were behind the Good Friday agreement, one was asked what was her biggest regret about the time. The regret was that nothing was done for victims.

A number of these attempts were undertaken when the right hon. Member for Leeds Central was a Minister in Government. Indeed, I slightly worry about his brilliant academic mind and his recall for any of our future exchanges, but I know that he will remember all too well the difficulties and complexities involved in these issues. None the less, it is incumbent on us to ensure that any process for dealing with the past focuses on measures that can deliver positive outcomes for as many of those directly affected by the troubles as possible.

That comes—it really does—with finely balanced political and moral choices, including a conditional immunity process, which I acknowledge is difficult for very many, but we must be honest about what we can realistically deliver for people in circumstances where the prospects of achieving justice in the traditional

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

sense are so vanishingly small. That is why the Government are unable to support the Opposition and will be disagreeing to Lords amendments 44D, 44E, 44F, 44G, 44H and 44J.

I will close my comments by recognising that the right hon. Member for Leeds Central has come to this debate with a fresh pair of eyes. Quite understandably, he has not had much more than 48 hours to go through what is a very detailed piece of legislation, but I know that he has followed these debates in great detail from the Back Benches. I know that in due course he will look at this and reach his own conclusions. I encourage him when doing so to reflect on the immense difficulty of this task, and to consider how the Government have genuinely sought to strengthen the legislation with encouragement from his party. He may also want to consider the toughest of all questions: if not this Bill, then what? I hope that upon Royal Assent the Opposition will engage constructively with the chief commissioner to help to ensure that the new commission can deliver the better outcomes for all those affected by the troubles that everyone across this House would like to achieve.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 288, Noes 205.

Division No. 321]**[1.50 pm****AYES**

Afolami, Bim	Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Afriyie, Adam	Butler, Rob
Aiken, Nickie	Cairns, rh Alun
Aldous, Peter	Carter, Andy
Allan, Lucy (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Cartledge, James
Anderson, Lee	Cash, Sir William
Anderson, Stuart	Cates, Miriam
Andrew, rh Stuart	Caulfield, Maria
Ansell, Caroline	Chalk, rh Alex
Argar, rh Edward	Chishti, Rehman
Atherton, Sarah	Chope, Sir Christopher
Atkins, Victoria	Churchill, Jo
Bacon, Gareth	Clark, rh Greg
Bacon, Mr Richard	Clarke, Theo
Badenoch, rh Kemi	Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Bailey, Shaun	Clarkson, Chris
Baker, Duncan	Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Baker, Mr Steve	Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Baldwin, Harriett	Colburn, Elliot
Baron, Mr John	Collins, Damian
Baynes, Simon	Costa, Alberto
Bell, Aaron	Courts, Robert
Benton, Scott	Coutinho, Claire
Beresford, Sir Paul	Crabb, rh Stephen
Berry, rh Sir Jake	Crosbie, Virginia
Bhatti, Saqib	Crouch, Tracey
Blackman, Bob	Davies, rh David T. C.
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Davies, Dr James
Bowie, Andrew	Davies, Mims
Bradley, Ben	Davis, rh Mr David
Brady, Sir Graham	Davison, Dehenna
Braverman, rh Suella	Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Brereton, Jack	Dines, Miss Sarah
Brine, Steve	Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Bristow, Paul	Donelan, rh Michelle (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)
Britcliffe, Sara	Doyle-Price, Jackie
Browne, Anthony	Drax, Richard
Bruce, Fiona	Drummond, Mrs Flick
Buchan, Felicity	

Duddridge, Sir James	Jenkinson, Mark
Duguid, David	Jenkyns, Dame Andrea
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Jenrick, rh Robert
Dunne, rh Philip	Johnson, Gareth
Eastwood, Mark	Johnston, David
Ellis, rh Sir Michael	Jones, Andrew
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias	Jones, rh Mr David
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie	Jones, Fay
Eustice, rh George	Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Evans, Dr Luke	Jupp, Simon
Evennett, rh Sir David	Kawczynski, Daniel
Fabricant, Michael	Kearns, Alicia
Farris, Laura	Keegan, rh Gillian
Fell, Simon	Knight, rh Sir Greg
Firth, Anna	Kniveton, Kate
Fletcher, Katherine	Kruger, Danny
Fletcher, Mark	Lamont, John
Fletcher, Nick	Largan, Robert
Ford, rh Vicky	Latham, Mrs Pauline
Foster, Kevin	Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Fox, rh Dr Liam	Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Frazer, rh Lucy	Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
Freer, Mike	Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
French, Mr Louie	Loder, Chris
Fuller, Richard	Logan, Mark (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)
Fysh, Mr Marcus	Longhi, Marco
Garnier, Mark	Lopez, Julia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)
Gibb, rh Nick	Lopresti, Jack
Gideon, Jo	Loughton, Tim
Glen, rh John	Mackinlay, Craig
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert	Mackrory, Cherilyn
Gove, rh Michael	Maclean, Rachel
Grant, Mrs Helen (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Mak, Alan
Gray, James	Malthouse, rh Kit
Grayling, rh Chris	Mann, Scott
Green, Chris	Marson, Julie
Griffith, Andrew	Mayhew, Jerome
Grundy, James	Maynard, Paul
Gullis, Jonathan	McCartney, Jason
Halfon, rh Robert	McVey, rh Esther
Hall, Luke	Menzies, Mark
Hammond, Stephen	Mercer, rh Johnny
Hancock, rh Matt	Merriman, Huw
Hands, rh Greg	Metcalfe, Stephen
Harper, rh Mr Mark	Millar, Robin
Harris, Rebecca	Miller, rh Dame Maria
Harrison, Trudy	Mills, Nigel
Hart, Sally-Ann	Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Hart, rh Simon	Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Heald, rh Sir Oliver	Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Heapey, rh James	Moore, Robbie
Heaton-Harris, rh Chris	Mordaunt, rh Penny
Henderson, Gordon	Morris, Anne Marie
Henry, Darren	Morris, David (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)
Higginbotham, Antony	Morris, James
Hinds, rh Damian	Morrissey, Joy
Hoare, Simon	Mullan, Dr Kieran (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)
Hollinrake, Kevin	Mumby-Croft, Holly
Hollobone, Mr Philip	Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Holmes, Paul	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Howell, John	Nici, Lia
Howell, Paul	Nokes, rh Caroline
Huddleston, Nigel	Norman, rh Jesse
Hudson, Dr Neil	O'Brien, Neil
Hughes, Eddie	Offord, Dr Matthew
Hunt, Jane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i>)	Opperman, Guy
Hunt, Tom	Patel, rh Priti
Jack, rh Mr Alister	Penning, rh Sir Mike
Javid, rh Sajid	Penrose, John
Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil	

Philp, rh Chris
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 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
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:

Steve Double and
 Ruth Edwards

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Amesbury, Mike
 Anderson, Fleur
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Bardell, Hannah
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bonnar, Steven
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Sir Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Peter Grant*)
 Cameron, Dr Lisa

Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Douglas
 Clark, Feryal (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Creasy, Stella
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Dalton, Ashley
 David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Peter Grant*)
 Dowd, Peter
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive

Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Farron, Tim
 Farry, Stephen
 Fellows, Marion
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flynn, Stephen
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Girvan, Paul
 Glindon, Mary
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Greenwood, Lillian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Healey, rh John
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hollern, Kate
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Sarah
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kyle, Peter
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Linden, David
 Lloyd, Tony (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Peter Grant*)
 McMorris, Anna

Mearns, Ian
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Murray, James
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Peter Grant*)
 Norris, Alex
 Olney, Sarah
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Owen, Sarah
 Paisley, Ian
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robinson, Gavin
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Alyn
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thomson, Richard
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy

Winter, Beth
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Navendu Mishra and
Taiwo Owatemi

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendments 44D, 44E, 44F, 44G, 44H and 44J disagreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83H(2)), That a Committee be appointed to draw up a Reason to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to Lords amendments 44D, 44E, 44F, 44G, 44H and 44J;

That Chris Heaton-Harris, Robert Largan, Alexander Stafford, Tom Hunt, Chris Elmore, Tonia Antoniazzi and Richard Thomson be members of the Committee;

That Chris Heaton-Harris be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(*Mike Wood.*)

Question agreed to.

Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That, at today's sitting, notwithstanding paragraph (2)(c) of Standing Order No. 14 (Arrangement of public business), business in the name of the Leader of the Opposition may be entered upon at any hour and may be proceeded with, though opposed, for three hours; proceedings shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Penny Mordaunt.*)

Opposition Day

18TH ALLOTTED DAY (SECOND PART)

Safety of School Buildings

2.5 pm

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That an humble Address be presented to His Majesty, that he will be graciously pleased to give directions that there will be laid before this House by 13 September 2023 the following papers –

(a) submissions from the Department for Education to HM Treasury related to the spending reviews in 2020 and 2021; and

(b) all papers, advice, and correspondence, including submissions and electronic communications (including communications with and from Ministers and Special Advisers) within and between the Cabinet Office (including the Office of the Prime Minister), the Department for Education and HM Treasury relating to these submissions concerned with school buildings.

Today we seek the release of papers that would tell us what has and what has not been happening in our schools—papers that the Government refused again yesterday to release and about which the Prime Minister again evaded questions today. However, this debate is about much more than just the documents. It is about more than reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. It is about more than school buildings and their safety. This debate quite simply is about responsibility, and whether the Prime Minister will come clean about the allegation that he knew the risks, that he was warned, that he was told.

That is the issue in the motion before the House today: whether the Prime Minister was told that urgent action was needed to secure the safety of schools, but instead he slashed the cost of champagne; whether he will accept responsibility for his choices and whether he will be clear where responsibility lies. All of us are here with deep responsibilities to our constituents, to be open, to be honest, to take decisions objectively and selflessly, to accept accountability, to have integrity and to show leadership.

Let me be clear right from the outset that a Labour Government would have shown leadership on this, not just in the last few weeks but for years on end. That was our record in government. A Labour Secretary of State, faced today with a sudden crisis such as this, would have got those lists of the affected schools out quickly, would have been straight back to London, would have been communicating every day to parents and above all to children, would be taking steps not just to mitigate the immediate challenges around safety—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. She is not giving way. Perhaps she will give way later.

Bridget Phillipson: We would remember the lesson from the pandemic that every school day matters. We would be ensuring the continuity of education for every child in school. We would be ensuring in-person learning for all our children. We would be doing that right now, and we would not be looking for plaudits, blaming others, or demanding praise. We would accept responsibility for what had gone wrong on our watch, and we would take responsibility for fixing it—fixing it fast, fixing it to last and fixing it for good.

The Government cannot even fix sending out their suggested interventions for today's debate to the right set of Back-Benchers. It is hardly a surprise that they cannot fix the chaos in our schools. Here we are today, because of the utter shambles that has accompanied the start of a new school year for so many children. The public realm is literally crumbling around the next generation. The defining image of 13 years of Conservative Government is children cowering under steel props to stop the ceiling literally falling in on their heads.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Is it not always the case that when the Conservatives are in power, our schools crumble? In 1997 one in five schools were inadequate and needed to be rebuilt by a Labour Government. Because the Conservatives slashed the rebuilding programme, under this Government we are in the same dire situation again, and the only party that can fix it is a Labour party in government.

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Like him, I remember the transformation that that Labour Government delivered. I will come to that in more detail during the debate.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The Welsh Labour Government have complained that the briefing they received lacked the technical detail required to take forward the work on schools. Does the hon. Lady agree that the Secretary of State should provide the other Governments with full details from the working group when they become available?

Bridget Phillipson: I know that Conservative Members have a keen fascination with all things going on in Wales at the moment, and that Ministers have not always been in full possession of the facts at the Dispatch Box, so I will put a few on the record so that we can all be clear about the situation in Wales. In Wales, school capital funding has increased by around 122% in cash terms, and 23% in real terms, between 2014-15 and 2023-24. Perhaps we can use that as the basis for slightly more informed debate during today's discussions.

Today, our first priority must be safety—as it must always be. Guaranteeing that safety must ultimately be the responsibility of Ministers and of Government. That is why I repeatedly pressed the Secretary of State to publish a full list of all the schools with concerns about RAAC, which she has at last published today. However, I gently note that there could be omissions on that list, a number of which have already been drawn to my attention. I hope that we can get full clarity about the situation across our schools.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): The hon. Lady has made a whole series of allegations and challenges about the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister, but surely, in a devolved arrangement, all those responsibilities and challenges apply equally to the First Minister. She has recognised that the list of schools in England has been published; why has such a list not been published for Wales? Does she accept that that is an example of the Welsh Government failing education and schools in Wales?

Bridget Phillipson: The difference between the Labour Government in Wales and the Government here in Westminster is that, over the last 13 years, the Welsh

Government have continued with a school rebuilding programme, unlike the UK Government, who have cut funding and cut support to our schools time and again.

We want to be clear, open and honest with local authorities and multi-academy trusts about the steps that the Secretary of State is taking to get in place the protections and mitigations that are needed. She said on Monday:

"Absolutely nothing is more important than the safety of children and staff. It has always been the case that where we are made aware of a building that poses an immediate risk, we have taken immediate action."—[*Official Report*, 4 September 2023; Vol. 737, c. 52.]

Yet she was keen to spread the responsibility for the concrete crisis through time and space, including to her colleagues, who I understand had been sitting on their backsides; to the Welsh Government—a topic of interest for Members—whose ability to act swiftly has been hampered by key information not being shared; and to the last Labour Government, who left office 13 years ago.

The Secretary of State was keen to emphasise that it was not her Department's responsibility, or hers, to ensure the safety of our children at school. Pushing responsibility on to others—local authorities, the schools themselves, multi-academy trusts—without the powers, resources or support they need, is very simply passing the buck, and my word, there has been an awful lot of that this week.

As Ministers have been keen to remind us, concerns were first raised about RAAC back in the 1990s. By then, the wider issue was that too many schools, built quickly and cheaply in the previous 50 years, were approaching the end of their design life. The issues were many: RAAC, asbestos and the simple reality—in the school I went to and in so many other state schools across our country—of buckets in corridors, classrooms blackened by mould, windows that did not close and doors that would not shut.

I was at school back in the mid '90s, but I know how serious Labour politicians took those warnings, and I am proud that as the scale of the challenge became clear, Labour Ministers rose to it. In 2004, the Buildings Schools for the Future programme was launched to rebuild every secondary school in our country over 15 years. In 2007, Building Schools for the Future was joined by the primary capital programme to give every child the chance to learn safely in a first-rate learning environment. That was done not because it was simple or quick, nor because there were no easier, more popular or more eye-catching choices, but because it was right, because it was responsible, and because that Labour Government believed then, as we do now, that excellence must be for everyone, and that every child deserves the best start—not just some children, but all our children.

The change we saw in 2010, when the Conservatives entered Government, reflected a very different approach: an entirely botched cancellation of existing programmes not by Ministers long since retired, but by the Minister for Schools, the right hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb), who is still sitting on the Treasury Bench today, and by a former Education Secretary, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), who is still in the Cabinet. Ambitions were reduced and timelines extended. Ministers knew

[Bridget Phillipson]

the consequences when they took those decisions. They banked the savings and left our schools to rot slowly, quietly and inexorably.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend not think that the vast, overinflated amounts of money spent on some free school sites could have been better spent dealing with the collapsing schools?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for all the work that she has done over many years, as Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, to draw our attention to the problems. I will say a bit more about the recent report by the National Audit Office on many of these issues.

When we leave risks unattended, they worsen and, in time, things start to fail—first quickly, then suddenly. In July 2018, a ceiling suddenly collapsed at Singlewell Primary School in Kent, where RAAC failed without warning. Mercifully, no one was hurt. Months passed, and an alert from central Government and the Local Government Association went out that autumn emphasising the risks. It said:

“The limited durability of RAAC roofs and other RAAC structures has long been recognised; however recent experience (which includes two roof failures with little or no warning) suggests the problem may be more serious than previously appreciated and that many building owners are not aware that it is present in their property.”

Let me emphasise that final point: many building owners are not aware.

A few months after that, in May 2019, the Standing Committee on Structural Safety issued a note on the failure of RAAC planks. It said that all those installed before 1980

“are now past their expected service life and it is recommended that consideration is given to their replacement.”

It was not until March 2022—almost four years after that ceiling collapsed—that the Department for Education responded to the challenge of RAAC. How? It sent out a survey—not a surveyor, not a team of surveyors, and not even funding for surveyors, but a survey. If the issue was such a priority, and if the Secretary of State and her Department believed in immediate action, why, after a school collapsed in July 2018, did it take almost four years for the Department to send out a survey about RAAC in March 2022? I appreciate that the Secretary of State was not in post throughout that time, but responsibility in Government is not merely individual; crucially, it is collective and enduring. It stretches across Government and down the years. If she does not understand that point, perhaps she could seek advice from the Schools Minister, who has been in post for so many years, as he is today.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): The key fact is that the Welsh Government ordered surveys only in May 2023, while the UK Government started engaging with schools in 2022. Surely that shows a woeful lack of responsibility.

Bridget Phillipson: I have here a briefing document. It would save us all a bit of time and energy if Conservative Members just gave us the number and let us deal with it. The Welsh Labour Government have been taking consistent

action to rebuild schools during their time in office; the hon. Gentleman might not like it, but it is a fact, and that stands in stark contrast to what has been happening here in England.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. The Work and Pensions Committee highlighted last year the growing number of retired schoolteachers succumbing to mesothelioma because of exposure to asbestos during their working life. At the current rate of progress, it will take 350 years to remove all the asbestos from schools. Does she agree that the Department must get a move on with that?

Bridget Phillipson: My right hon. Friend is right to draw our attention to that matter, and I appreciate the work that his Committee has done on it. It would also be helpful if we had some clarity today from the Secretary of State about the risks that might arise when RAAC interacts with asbestos. If she could say a little bit more about that, I am sure all Members from across the House would be grateful.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Bridget Phillipson: I am just going to make a bit more progress.

For a responsible politician, being in government is not simply a matter of pressing the agenda of their political party, their donors or those who profit from Government contracts. It is about rising to the challenges that face our country, and accepting the blame when things go wrong as the price of acclaim when they go well.

The point about RAAC was made very ably by the Secretary of State, who said:

“a school can collapse for many reasons, not just RAAC”.

They can indeed! So many things are wrong right now with our schools estate: there are faulty boilers, inadequate insulation, roofs leaking, and asbestos in around four out of five of our schools; and as the pandemic taught us, ventilation is simply not good enough in too many of our schools. How do we know that? The condition data collection tells us all of it. By the Department's own admission, that exercise was not even a proper structural survey, despite coming 20 years after the risks of RAAC were first flagged, and seven years after the Government cancelled Labour's school rebuilding programmes, having not even looked at hazardous materials.

The condition data collection found that more than 7,000 elements of the school estate were in poor condition and needed to be prioritised for replacement. Were all those someone else's responsibility, too? Even the money that the Department did commit—the spending allocations of which the Minister for Schools speaks so proudly so often, with the keen pride of a Minister wholly oblivious to the scale of their own failure—was not all spent. Again, whose fault is that? Whose responsibility might that have been?

We are told that part of the difficulty in recent years has been finding the skilled labour to deliver the work that our schools so desperately need. I invite Conservative Members to reflect briefly on why exactly that might be. Could it be the dramatic overall drop in apprenticeship starts, the shortage of construction apprenticeships in

recent years, or the utter failure of the Government's apprenticeship levy to deliver spending on skills at the scale and pace we need? Could it be their wider failures on further education and in-work training? Thirteen years into a Conservative Government, who will take responsibility for that?

It was a Conservative Prime Minister who once savaged the press of this country for seeking "power without responsibility". Today, that is the entire ideology of the whole Conservative party. That failure to accept responsibility is not merely the ethic of the Secretary of State and her Ministers; it comes right from the very top. Today's Prime Minister was yesterday's Chancellor, and we know—not just from the former most senior official at the Department for Education, but from the Schools Minister himself—that at the 2021 spending review, when even Ministers knew that the problems needed tackling urgently and the rate of rebuilding needed to soar, the now Prime Minister said no, and every Conservative Member accepted that. Cheaper champagne, yes; safer schools, no. There has never been a clearer picture of the priorities of the Conservative party.

The Prime Minister, fond as he is of private donations to his old school, has form on saying no to high standards in schools for other people's children. He said no to the proper pandemic recovery plan that the Government's own recovery tsar recommended. In 2021, he said no to the capital spend that would have kept our schools safe and our children learning. Last spring, he said no to the desperate pleas of civil servants in the Department for Education for the resources to make schools safe. In his spending review speech back in 2021, he even boasted of returning overall real-terms education spending in a few years' time to the levels of the last Labour Government. That was not an admission, wrung as a repentant confession; it was a boast, made with pride, that one day—but perhaps not yet—he would take education as seriously as Labour.

Those who complain about party politics might reflect for just a moment on whether they would level the same accusation at the National Audit Office. In June, the NAO reported that

"Following years of underinvestment, the estate's overall condition is declining and around 700,000 pupils are learning in a school that the responsible body or DfE believes needs major rebuilding or refurbishment. Most seriously, DfE recognises significant safety concerns across the estate, and has escalated these concerns to the government risk register."

Just yesterday, in respect of RAAC, the Comptroller and Auditor General was clear that

"the long-term risks it posed took too long to be properly addressed".

On the sustained inadequacy of the Government's capital programme, he went even further:

"Failure to bite this bullet leads to poor value, with more money required for emergency measures or a sticking plaster approach."

Failing to bite the bullet; poor value; a sticking-plaster approach—13 years into this Government, those are absolutely damning words from the Government's own spending watchdog.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): My hon. Friend will be aware that Jonathan Slater, the former permanent secretary, said that civil servants told the Government that there was a "critical risk to life"

because of the dodgy buildings, and the failure to follow advice and invest in making sure our schools are safe. Does she agree that this Government are seriously putting children's lives at risk through their incompetence and negligence, and through the failure of the Prime Minister to make sure there is proper investment in our schools?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If Ministers are confident about everything they have done and the decisions that were taken, they will back our motion today, allow us to see the papers, and be transparent with this House.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): I should be shocked by the lack of humility from Conservative Front Benchers, but sadly, I am not. Schools are literally collapsing around us, and the Conservatives want people to thank them for it. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Education Secretary needs to get a grip and explain why her offices got a £34 million refurbishment while schools are crumbling under this Tory Government?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who makes a very important point.

Finally, let me turn to the wording of the motion. I know that many Conservative Members share Labour's concerns, and I ask them today to think of the young people and the school staff in their constituency. However loyal they have been in every past debate, I ask them to help us put truth and transparency first, and to force responsibility on their Front Benchers. It is time for the full truth to come out about why our schools are unsafe today, and whose decision that was. It is time at last for Ministers, and the Prime Minister in particular, to take and accept responsibility for the broken country they will leave behind. I commend the motion to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call the Secretary of State, it will be obvious to the House that a great many people wish to speak this afternoon, so there will be a time limit of approximately five minutes on Back-Bench speeches. I give that warning; I can see that colleagues are looking at their long notes, and hopefully taking a few pages out of them.

2.27 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): This Government are committed to making sure that every child in this country gets a first-class education and every opportunity to make the most of their abilities. More than that, underpinning that commitment is a deeper one: to ensure that children are safe and secure in the places where they learn. I am glad that the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) has chosen to raise the issue of the safety of school buildings and investment in the school estate. Nothing is more important than the safety of children and staff in our schools, and no issue could highlight more my willingness to take the right decisions, even if they are politically difficult. The country, and the children in our schools, deserve nothing less. As I set out in the House on Monday, the Government will not shy away from that responsibility, no matter how much the Labour party descends into the political gutter.

[Gillian Keegan]

I understand that parents, schools and this House are concerned about the issue of RAAC; we are acting responsibly and moving decisively to address it, and minimising disruption to education. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) is shouting from a sedentary position, so I will answer her question: £34 million was signed off for a Government building for the Department for Education. That was signed off by the Department's commercial director, and was nothing to do with me. That was based on a decision made in 2019, before I was Minister. The right hon. Lady is very experienced, so I am sure that she will understand that Ministers do not sign off on Government buildings. It was the commercial director of the DFE who signed that off in 2019.

To go back to the issue in this case, because that was very misleading, we are dealing not with an issue caused in the last year, the last five years, the last decade or even the last 20 years, but with a legacy issue dating back to the 1950s. As the Chancellor set out, we will not shirk this responsibility and we will spend whatever it takes to keep children safe.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): In Leeds, our school repair backlog is over £66 million, and the council is given £6 million a year by the Government to tackle that. The lead councillor for education, Councillor Jonathan Pryor, has written to every single Secretary of State for Education since 2018. Eight letters have been sent to raise school condition funding, but all pleas have been ignored. Does the Secretary of State really think that is acceptable?

Gillian Keegan: I will look at Leeds specifically, but we have awarded millions to Leeds. The biggest difference between our programme and any programme that was ever done by your Government when they were in power—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I think the Secretary of State means “his Government”.

Gillian Keegan: I am sorry. Unlike the hon. Gentleman's Government when they were in power, we actually did a conditions survey. We have done two conditions surveys and we have done a full RAAC survey, which we are now finishing with the responses that are coming in. We know the conditions; previously, the Labour Government did not know anything about the conditions and no decisions were made based on the condition of schools.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): St Francis' primary school in my constituency identified RAAC problems way back in 2019. It had to fund its own survey to do that. Since 2019, St Francis' has submitted two bids to make its roof safe, and both were rejected. They appealed both times, and both appeals were rejected. Can I ask the Secretary of State how she can justify the rejection of those bids, and how can she justify the potentially much higher costs that must now be paid from the public purse to make St Francis' safe?

Gillian Keegan: The hon. Lady raises a good point, because of course the responsible body, St Francis', has done the right thing by doing its survey. That is what everybody was asked to do in 2019 and in 2018, and in

guidance since then. There are conditions and condition-based requests, and if the school wants to get in touch and give us the details, I am very happy to look at that case. I am very serious about making sure that we get rid of RAAC in our schools.

The school estate consists of over 22,000 schools and sixth-form colleges, with over 64,000 blocks. Of course, the condition varies across the estate, and a number of buildings are reaching the end of their useful life. That is why we have a 10-year rebuilding programme, and why the spending reviews in 2020 and 2021 allocated more than £7 billion for maintenance allocations for schools on top of that programme.

Several hon. Members rose—

Gillian Keegan: I should make a bit of progress, because I do have an awful lot of this in the speech. I really do want to satisfy people with detailed information because I have a lot of it.

Although local authorities, academy trusts and other bodies are directly responsible for school buildings, we support them by allocating significant capital funding each year, delivering major rebuilding programmes and providing guidance on effective estate management. Responsible bodies' local knowledge of their estates and their work to maintain their estates make them much better placed to ensure that school and college buildings are kept safe, compliant with regulations and in good working order. However, the Department always stands ready to provide additional support on a case-by-case basis if we are alerted to a safety issue by those responsible bodies. This is the normal pattern of maintenance—a careful and calibrated local response.

However, we judged in this case that the issue of RAAC required us to take a much more proactive and direct approach. This approach is unprecedented across the UK, where England is leading. Sensing the scale of the potential challenge, we improved our surveying so that we had the capacity to act, even if we did not need to do so. Our condition data collection, which ran from 2017 to 2019, visited nearly all 22,000 schools and sixth-form colleges, and is one of the largest data collections of its kind. It helps us to understand what is needed in schools and to target our efforts in the way that best meets needs. In contrast, over the 13 years of the last Labour Government, there was not a single comprehensive review of the school estate. Yes, that is right: they were simply in the dark. Individual reports from the condition data collection—

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Gillian Keegan: I will make a bit of progress, but I am not ignoring Members and I will take other interventions.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Gillian Keegan: I will make a bit of progress, and then I will come back to both hon. Members.

As we became aware of the specific issues with RAAC, we supplemented the data collection with more targeted surveys especially for RAAC. That was done so that when we made decisions, we would be able to act. I will leave colleagues to draw their own conclusions from the fact that Labour-run Wales is now playing catch-up to

identify where RAAC is in its school estate. On the question from the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams), we briefed Wales verbally on new technical guidance on 1 September and we shared visual information on three cases over the weekend.

Richard Graham: None of us should be here to criticise the scrutiny of safety in schools, so can I thank the Department for dispatching fast, as requested, two surveyors to look at the one school in my constituency of Gloucester that is potentially affected? I also thank them for completing their mission fast, so that the head could today confirm to his teachers, parents and pupils alike that there is no RAAC in the school whatsoever.

Gillian Keegan: I thank my hon. Friend, and he is absolutely right. That is what we are doing with any work. We are being ultra-cautious here. The decision I have made is ultra-cautious, and first of all it is to make sure that we survey all schools as quickly as possible.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): By the same volition, a school in my constituency sent in the results of the survey on 14 July and was promised by the Department that it would be contacted on Friday or Monday with the report, but it has heard from no one and it was given a telephone number that gets it through to the wrong department. We now have children out of school as a precautionary measure, which is surely unacceptable. Will the Secretary of State look at this case, but will she also say how many other schools are in this position?

Gillian Keegan: I will definitely look at that case, because that sounds as though it took place before the decision I took and also before I stood up the caseworkers, proppers, cabinets and portacabins. If the hon. Lady will give me the details of that case, I will look at it, because that should not be happening. What should be happening is exactly the same as what my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) laid out.

Dame Meg Hillier: The Secretary of State is confident, it seems, that there are enough surveyors to do this work, but since she made this decision about schools, questions have been raised about many other public buildings and I suspect structural surveyors are now in much shorter supply. Is she still confident that structural engineers and surveyors will be available to do this work, and is she sticking to her timetable of having answers by the end of next week?

Gillian Keegan: I am confident that, because we started early, we have done a lot of these surveys already. Quite a lot of the schools were involved at the beginning, so I am confident of that. I am also confident that the NHS has conducted surveys of its main buildings, and I think the courts have also done surveys. However, we have now increased the number of surveying companies from three to eight to make sure that we can get through all the cases, including any that Members are concerned about, as soon as possible.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Back in January this year, I submitted a written question to the Government about the number of schools in my

constituency of Wirral West that had buildings rated as very likely to collapse. In the response I received, the Schools Minister said:

“Department officials are clear that there are no areas within schools open to pupils where there is a known immediate risk of collapse.”

Presumably those buildings would be evacuated if that was the case—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I appreciate that the Secretary of State has been very generous in giving way to Members, but she will not be as aware as I am that there are 22 people who wish to speak this afternoon. The Secretary of State is very politely giving way to Members who are not going to take part in the debate, and if we have long interventions from those Members, people who are waiting to speak will not have the chance to do so when we come to the end of the debate. I am trying to get some fairness into this, but I do appreciate that the Secretary of State is being polite and I will allow her to respond to the intervention.

Gillian Keegan: Thank you for that, Madam Deputy Speaker, and for giving me the reminder, because I do not want to take time away from people who have put in to speak. What my right hon. Friend the Schools Minister said is absolutely right: any time there is an immediate risk, action is immediately taken. However, what we were doing was more preventive than that: finding out where everything was, so that we could act. When the three new cases happened over the summer, that is when I made a decision to be very cautious, because I did not want to take any risk whatsoever. I knew exactly where to go, because I knew exactly which schools were judged as non-critical. I knew exactly what we needed to do.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Gillian Keegan: I am sorry but I will not give way. I know I promised the hon. Gentleman, but I will see if I can make a bit more progress.

We deposited copies of the school condition data in the House Libraries on 20 July this year, in advance of the summer recess. It is also available on the Parliament website, and I am sure that many Members who are interested in this subject will be interested in seeing it. The successor programme, CDC2, is now under way. Early indications from the programme, which has been under way since March 2021 and will finish in 2026, and feedback from the sector suggest that in almost every case where a D grade—a bad condition—was identified in CDC1, it has since been addressed. We are getting on with the job. That is a demonstration of the approach that I and my Department are taking: we identify where the issue is and how severe it is, then we take the right corrective action. That is what our children deserve and what our schools deserve. When we have data, we can act to improve our schools.

The 2021 spending review announced a total of £19 billion of capital funding to support the education sector between 2022-23 and 2024-25, including £5.4 billion for school condition allocations. That includes £3.6 billion announced in allocations for the first two years of the period to improve the condition of the school estate. That is in addition to the school rebuilding programme, which is rebuilding 500 schools over 10 years. That

[Gillian Keegan]

builds on nearly £30 billion of capital between 2016-17 and 2021-22, including over £13 billion for improving or replacing buildings.

Improving education is this Government's mission. Ensuring that our education settings are safe is a key part of that, and we therefore prioritise it as part of our capital funding, and actively manage funding and support for the school estate to stay open and safe. I also note the distinction between our targeted approach and what came before. The system we inherited was found by an independent review of capital to be poorly targeted and wasteful. We on this side of the House have acted to protect children, while others have ignored problems for decades. School building is more effective and efficient than ever before. The significant investments made in education in recent years by this Government, coupled with essential reform, have raised standards for our children and given them a better chance of success in life.

Since 2010, we have reformed our capital programmes to bring down the cost of school building. The James review of education capital in 2011 found that Building Schools for the Future, the programme that the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South is proud of, was overly bureaucratic and did not deliver outcomes that were good or affordable. Just as the people of Birmingham are finding out so heartbreakingly today, and as I saw as a young girl growing up in Liverpool, the consequences of Labour always see things worse off than when they started. By contrast, at the 2020 spending review we announced our 10-year school rebuilding programme, which will transform buildings at 500 schools across England. We have already announced 400 of those schools, including 239 in December 2022, prioritising those in poor condition and with evidence of potential safety issues.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Gillian Keegan: Perhaps I could make a little more progress, as I feel I will not have been fair if I don't.

We currently have a further 100 places on the programme, and the Government will continue to focus on investing in the school estate. We strive to deliver value for money—it is easy to spend money, but getting value for money is what the people of this country expect—and ensure that our capital funding is spent as efficiently as possible. As the National Audit Office concluded in 2017, the priority school building programme, the predecessor to our school rebuilding programme, replaced schools more efficiently, costing approximately a third less per square metre than the previous capital programme, Building Schools for the Future.

We committed to 500 schools over 10 years through our rebuilding programme, with an average of 50 schools entering delivery every year. That is in line with the scale of projects delivered every year since the start of its predecessor. There has been some debate about the scale of rebuilding in recent days, but the level of our ambition is unchanged. We have not scaled back our ambitions for school rebuilding, and we will not. Although the school rebuilding programme is in its initial stages of delivery, it is ramping up as more projects begin construction. The exact amount that rebuilding programmes

spend will differ year on year, based on the stage of delivery that projects are in at any given time. That is the norm for significant capital projects, which means that when we try to make comparisons, a lot of cherry-picking goes on.

Overall since 2012, 524 schools have been rebuilt or refurbished through our central rebuilding programmes, and a further 408 are in the pipeline. We are building schools more quickly, more efficiently, and better targeted on condition and need than ever before. Sometimes, however, there will be issues that we have to deal with outside the normal processes. The role of Government and of Ministers is to respond to that, and to take ownership and full responsibility.

When new information about RAAC crossed my desk over the summer, I understood that the buck stopped with me, even if the problem was 50 years in the making. As I set out in my statement to the House on Monday, the safety of pupils and staff is this Government's absolute priority. We have regularly and swiftly updated our guidance in line with the latest technical advice, to ensure that responsible bodies are aware of the risks and able to act. In light of the three new cases over the summer, and given the disparate nature of the schools estate and, most importantly, the fact that children were involved, we made the difficult decision that it was no longer reasonable or safe for spaces known to contain RAAC to be used. That was a very difficult decision, because there were operational implications for others, and an impact on parents and children.

It is important to note that the technical advice on RAAC does not say that we must put mitigations in place in all buildings—that is not what the RAAC advice says. Where RAAC is present, we can keep it as long as we manage it well. We have acted with the utmost caution to reassure parents and teachers, and to establish a comprehensive plan to mitigate and resolve settings with RAAC, because we know where they are. Let me be clear: we were able to do that only because we had prepared for this eventuality. I had hoped that that preparation would be unnecessary, but sadly it was not and I had to take a decision. I am grateful to previous Secretaries of State who made decisions to ensure that we were able to establish where RAAC was present, and to act rapidly. We could show leadership, we could show direction, and we could tell people exactly where to go with their portacabins and with their propping.

Professional advice from technical experts on RAAC has evolved over time, and the question of how to manage its risks has spanned successive Governments since 1994.

Nobody is blameless in that, including Labour Members, who were warned in 1999, 2002, and 2007 alike. Unlike them, I am interested in keeping our children safe and improving learning. They try to play politics, and they can play politics all they like, but as they are finding in Wales, the public can smell opportunism and recoil at politicians who fail to show leadership.

We on the Government side of the House saw the risk and decided to prepare. My Department alerted the sector about the potential risks of RAAC in 2018, and in February 2021 we issued guidance. We were concerned that not all responsible bodies were acting quickly enough, so we decided to take a more direct approach, as I laid out on Monday, ensuring that we got all the surveys. We found out where RAAC was and we took action.

The vast majority of schools will be unaffected, as we have set out in information published today, and 104 of the affected settings are offering face-to-face education for pupils. Each impacted school and college has a dedicated caseworker to help implement a mitigation plan. For the past few days that has been my main concern—operationalising this, and ensuring that we can establish and scale up a programme to give schools the support they need due to the decisions I had to take. Most people will receive little disruption to their education, but that could include using other spaces on the school site, or in nearby schools or elsewhere in the local area, until structural supports or temporary buildings are installed. Project delivery, property and technical experts will be on hand to support schools to put face-to-face education measures in place as quickly as possible. We have published the list of schools that we know to be affected by RAAC, and we will be publishing an update in two weeks. It was important to give those affected schools and colleges time to focus on mitigations with support from my Department, and to inform parents directly. Thanks to the hard work of education leaders and local councils, 104 settings are providing face-to-face learning for all pupils this week. A further 20 settings have hybrid arrangements in place, with some pupils learning off-site, while 19 have delayed the start of term by a few days to ensure that pupils can start attending face-to-face learning safely on site. Only a very small number—four—have needed to move to remote learning. We anticipate that the majority of those will be able to offer pupils face-to-face learning soon, ensuring that disruption to education is kept to a minimum. Nine settings have since been found not to have RAAC after being reinvestigated.

I want to be clear that we will spend whatever it takes to keep children safe, with extra funding coming from DFE capital budgets to fund mitigations. That includes paying for emergency mitigation work needed to make buildings safe, including alternative classroom space where necessary. Where schools need additional help with revenue costs, such as transport to other locations, we are actively engaging with every school affected to put appropriate support in place. We will also fund longer-term refurbishment projects, or rebuilding projects where needed—taking responsibility, taking action and showing leadership.

As all Members know, the spending review is the process that determines how the Government will spend money over the course of a Parliament. It would be inaccurate, incomplete and inappropriate to disclose the details requested of the sensitive negotiations between His Majesty's Treasury and individual Departments—inaccurate, because it would show only part of the picture of a complex decision-making process that takes place between multiple Departments, Ministers, officials and other individuals with varying priorities; incomplete, because such a process has to look across the board at priorities and trade-offs for all Departments to ensure we can deliver for everyone, yet this motion focuses on only one; and inappropriate, because it would be categorically in breach of the long-standing traditions and expectations that confidential and often commercially sensitive information is not disclosed into the public domain and that officials can give full and frank advice to Ministers.

Some Labour Members present have themselves served in government. They know that those in the civil service use every ounce of their professional skill to help them

as Ministers and deliver the objectives of the elected Governments they serve. I have to ask: what would those Members say to those officials about a motion that might result in the making public of the advice of civil servants—people who can never answer back themselves—which they had thought was being given to Ministers in confidence? We know that they would not want that to be done.

It is vital to the conduct of good government and very much in the public interest that officials and Ministers in Departments and across government have a safe space to provide free and frank advice to inform policy and spending decisions. I note that such an exemption is one of the bedrocks of the freedom of information laws that the Labour party introduced. In the case of the spending review and related discussions, anything else would undermine that position and make it harder for Governments—now and in the future—to make the right balance of decisions and to maximise value for money for the taxpayer. That cannot be right, regardless of party, colour or the political events of the day.

I repeat what I said at the start of this speech: nothing is more important than the safety of children and staff in our schools. We are investing billions of pounds rebuilding our schools and providing the funding and support that academy trusts, local authorities, dioceses and schools need to manage the school and college estate effectively. As the Prime Minister and Chancellor have said, we will spend whatever it takes to keep children safe in our schools. After this debate, I will return to that work and to overseeing the operational response that ensures we are keeping children safe and protected and their education ongoing. In the meantime, I urge all colleagues to vote against this motion this evening.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): As I said earlier, a great many people wish to catch my eye, so there will be a time limit, immediately effective, of five minutes on Back-Bench speeches.

2.53 pm

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): The debate we are having today is important. It goes to the very heart of what it means to govern and the very purpose of good government, which is to educate and protect our young people properly. The issues of the safety of school buildings and the safety of our children are of paramount importance. I am shocked that even has to be said, but unfortunately what has emerged in the past week has made it apparent that it does. Despite the Secretary of State's exasperation on this issue, I will not be congratulating her on her handling of it.

The Secretary of State is a member of a party and a Government that have seen school budgets as expendable and a place to save money, whether that is the abolition of Labour's Building Schools for the Future programme, which I will say more on later, or the Prime Minister deciding in his previous role as Chancellor of the Exchequer that the safety of our people is not a priority for this Government, a view that he has continued into his premiership. I am sure that the Government will be tired of hearing the words of Jonathan Slater, the former permanent secretary to the Department for Education from 2016 to 2020, but he knows what he is talking about. He said that the investigations by civil

[Julie Elliott]

servants led to them recommending that 300 to 400 schools needed repairs each year. The Department requested Treasury funding to cover 200, yet the decision made in 2021 was to halve the number of schools repaired from 100 to 50. Who was the Chancellor at that time making those decisions? It was the Prime Minister, who is now presiding over this Conservative Government's education crisis.

This is not just numbers on a page. Across the country, more than 100 schools are affected. Eleven so far have been reported in the north-east, four of which are closed. They are vital to the future of our children, but those schools are now unsafe. It is shameful. Tellingly, in his response to the former permanent secretary, the Prime Minister said in an interview with the BBC:

"If you look at what we have been doing over the previous decade, that's completely in line with what we have always done". Yes—cutting funding to repair and build schools. I could not agree with the Prime Minister more. It is exactly what Conservative Governments have done over the past decade: ignoring the priorities of the people of Sunderland, the north-east and the country, ignoring the life chances of our young people and ignoring this issue, which has been on the Government's desk for a few years. We go from crisis to crisis, and it is working people and families who suffer. That is why we need change in this country.

Building Schools for the Future, the programme that the last Labour Government had for replacing all or part of schools that needed to be rebuilt, was abolished by the Conservative-led coalition in 2010. When Labour left power, the economy was growing. It was the policy of austerity by the coalition Government that led us to recession. The Conservatives then were the same as the Conservatives now: a threat to our economy, with a lack of care for our schools.

In Sunderland, in 2010, under BSF wave 2, the council was informed of an indicative budget of £137 million to cover 14 school rebuilds or ICT infrastructure replacements. When the plug was pulled on BSF, that funding was withdrawn. The issues in the schools remained. Today, two of those schools have been identified on the list of the 500 schools in the worst condition in the country. Thirteen years later, action has not been taken. Refurbishment of the others has had to be funded by alternative capital due to the absence of Government support. Six of them are still in need, with no progress since 2010. That is shocking.

The use of RAAC in school buildings, and probably other public buildings as well, is not the responsibility of any one Government, but sorting the problems that has caused is. The Government's complete lack of prioritising school buildings being fit for purpose or funding education properly has led to the crisis that many of our schools find themselves in today. This is a self-made schools crisis that the Government have brought on themselves. It has forced schools to close and it is the result of years of neglect by Conservatives. The Secretary of State might like to play the victim here, but it is our children who are in danger in this crisis. Someone needs to take responsibility for putting our young people in danger, and so far the Prime Minister is refusing to accept it. The Education Secretary has said that the safety of school buildings is not the responsibility—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am afraid that the hon. Lady has exceeded her five minutes. I call the Chairman of the Education Committee.

2.59 pm

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, and I am grateful to the Opposition for giving us the opportunity to debate this issue, which is of urgent concern across the country. The Education Committee has requested Ministers to attend a session, and I am glad to report that we will have a Minister attending the Committee the Tuesday after next to give evidence on this important issue.

I want to raise some of the specific concerns we are hearing from school leaders about the way in which the announcements came about and their timing. I think we all agree that it is deeply unfortunate that changes had to be made so late in the school holidays, and before. I understand from conversations that I have had with Ministers today and from public statements that some of the information came to light only very recently. The Select Committee will push for a more detailed timeline on when information came to light and when decisions were made.

I heard many times when I was a Minister the concern of heads and leaders in education about announcements made late in the holidays, just before schools return, and I think we all agree on that. It is deeply unfortunate and troubling in this case. However, I do understand Ministers taking a zero-risk approach on roof collapses and children. From what I have been told, it seems that the estimation of risk—the idea that there were lower-risk and higher-risk forms of RAAC—fundamentally changed. It is important that we get more detail on that so that we can scrutinise the decision making.

On the consequences for schools, we now need to ensure that there is the minimum disruption. I welcome some of the steps set out by the Secretary of State in that regard. I welcome the fact that there are dedicated caseworkers working with those schools where issues have been identified and that more surveys are taking place where there is uncertainty. I would gently say that there is deep concern over the fact that responsible bodies are many and various in this respect, and their capability in understanding their buildings is highly varied. What works for a large multi-academy trust or a local authority managing a number of schools and has a dedicated estates team can be different from a more isolated school and single-academy trust. In particular, small primaries will not necessarily have the expertise to manage these issues. I seek assurance from the Secretary of State that there will be extra support for those more needy schools and that the Department will cover the costs where there is uncertainty of surveying. It is important that we have that assurance in the coming weeks.

I am grateful to the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) that I was able to join that Committee's session on school capital before the summer and to question the permanent secretary at the Department for Education over RAAC. At the time, it seemed that visits relating to RAAC and the gathering of information were being accelerated, but given what we know now, in the light of the risk changing, it is a

great shame that all those visits had not been completed by that time and we did not have a more complete risk picture. An update on the figures given to that Committee would be useful. I look forward to joining the Public Accounts Committee in our scrutiny of this issue when it meets next week.

There are many more questions to ask. Crucially, we need to ensure that lessons are learned from this for the long run and that when we build public buildings, we do so with materials that have a life that will match their use. That means multiple generations, not 30 years or 50 years.

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Walker: I will give way briefly to the hon. Gentleman, but I want to conclude shortly.

Andrew Western: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Given the concern he is now expressing about how public buildings were built in the past, does he stand by his comments about Labour's motion on school buildings in May that he described at the time as scaremongering?

Mr Walker: That motion was similar to this one—a Humble Address—which, for the reasons already set out, I do not think is an effective way of going about getting the relevant information. I think that proper parliamentary scrutiny is the way, and I absolutely intend to provide that proper parliamentary scrutiny. There are huge risks in the approach that the Opposition are taking with repeated Humble Addresses, undermining the confidentiality of advice given by officials to Ministers. The idea that a future Labour Government would want to disclose all submissions in spending reviews is, I am afraid, for the birds. We have to be realistic about making sure we have a proper process of scrutiny.

I will hold Ministers to account on this, and as Chair of the Select Committee I have a lot of questions to ask. My members do as well, and I know that a number of them have affected schools in their constituencies. We will want to press Ministers on those issues. I do not think that a Humble Address is the right way to go about it, and that is why I will not support the motion, but I do fundamentally believe that we must ensure there is more investment in replacing school buildings and increased investment in the quality of the school estate. Yes, that is to address issues such as RAAC, but it is also to address issues that have caused real harm, such as asbestos, which we may not have much time to talk about in the debate. It is important to take into account the point made by the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), in that respect as well.

I will not detain the House longer because I will have my opportunity with the Select Committee to ask Ministers much more. This is a hugely important issue and we need all Governments to get it right. I urge Ministers in the UK Government to work with the devolved Administrations to ensure that they can take the proactive measures needed to make schools across the UK utterly safe.

3.5 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I want to start by extending my thoughts to every student, parent, teacher and school staff member who is this week

having their education disrupted, unable to do their job or having to work around the clock to find alternative teaching settings. My first question is: what new evidence has been presented? I do not believe that “evidence” is the right word to be using. Through the Public Accounts Committee, NAO reports and visits, I have been looking at RAAC and, just from having a glance online, it is easy to find multiple reports, including a report from February 2022 by the Institution of Structural Engineers that says that although visual surveys help to assess the condition of panels,

“the nature of any warning signs of sudden failure at the bearings are not fully known...Not all defects are visible...panels which appear to be in a good condition may conceal hidden defects which could present a risk to the integrity of the panels...The corrosion of reinforcement could lead to large pieces of RAAC falling which presents a risk to occupants.”

So I do not believe that there is new evidence; what I believe is that the risk has come to fruition. What we need to understand is why, in this place, we have not taken the risk seriously enough when we have known since 2018 about the risk of sudden failure without any warning signs.

Thankfully, I have been informed by the DFE that it is not aware of any confirmed cases of RAAC in my constituency, but Government actions have undermined my constituents' confidence in the inspection process. One school, which we are in close communication with, had a second survey carried out this week by the local authority after there was confusion by the Department as to whether the first survey had taken place. RAAC was not identified in either survey. However, some parts of the survey could not be completed due to the possible presence of asbestos, leaving that school in limbo, not knowing if RAAC presents a problem underneath the asbestos.

Parents should not have to worry about the safety of their children when they send them to school, and teachers should not be worried about their workplaces being at risk of collapse, but here we are. I am frankly not that surprised that the Secretary of State said it was “not the job” of the Department for Education to ensure that children are learning in safe school environments. At the start of the year, I raised the case of my constituent Carla, a parent who suffered a serious head injury after a 15-foot piece of board flew off the outside of her child's school. She suffered significant injuries: she had a black eye and went on to have headaches—she needed to have an MRI scan—and minor scarring, and she still suffers from tinnitus. It could have been a lot worse—someone could have died as a result of that event. As Carla said in her statement to me,

“this...could have been prevented and it was pure luck that no one died”.

That happened when she was going to collect her children. It is exceedingly lucky that the three incidents this summer happened when no one was there to be hurt.

According to data from the Government, from 2017 to 2019, 27 schools in Sheffield had at least one grade C “poor” construction type, and 14 were found to have at least one grade D construction type. I have visited schools and spoken to headteachers, all of whom report a similar story of decade-old buildings going unchecked, repairs to the basics being left undone, and of struggling to manage capital budgets that have been cut over the years to fix things such as boilers. I am really concerned

[Olivia Blake]

that, to grapple with this issue, we need to ensure that all the school estate is looked at in the round so that issues such as asbestos do not get forgotten.

While two schools benefited from the Government's last round of funding, it was barely enough to cover the basic repairs. Many missed out on any funding at all. I have to question why the guidance to schools on this year's funding round stated that not all RAAC is dangerous. I would like to ask the Secretary of State if she stands by that statement that not all RAAC is dangerous. Why was it not the aim to eradicate RAAC from schools, as stated by the NHS and the Department of Health and Social Care?

Finally, I hope that schools will be reimbursed for the costs associated with RAAC litigation and setting up classrooms and temporary accommodation. I want to know what assurance the Secretary of State has received that the 600-odd schools awaiting inspections or that have been inspected is the upper limit of those at risk of RAAC. What assurances does she, and the Department for Education, have about the quality of the surveys being conducted?

3.10 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I rise as the Member of Parliament who, unfortunately, probably has more RAAC schools than any other. That does not take into account nearby secondary schools, three of which are identified on the list of cancelled projects in the Building Schools for the Future programme with RAAC in Colchester, in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), and which are all likely to be attended by pupils from my constituency.

I heave a deep sigh. Opposition day debates are about blaming the Government—I have been in opposition, and we all know that. They are not about what has fundamentally gone wrong and what lessons there are to be learned. Like the Prime Minister, as he pointed out earlier on the spending review, I can find no reference to RAAC schools in *Hansard* relating to any statement, urgent question or debate from 2010 when the Building Schools for the Future programme was cancelled, and cancelled it was for very good reasons. Labour's motion is retrospectively trying to allocate blame in the past, not explaining what a Labour Government would do now or in future.

Dame Meg Hillier: I am tempted to my feet to say that there was a properly planned programme of renewal of schools, and although RAAC in itself was not the only issue being looked at, it was part of that discussion. Just because it is not named does not mean that there was not a plan. There was a plan, and a Conservative Secretary of State axed that on day one of the coalition Government.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: That is of no comfort to my constituents, I am afraid, because nearly all the schools concerned are primary schools, and there were no primary schools in the Building Schools for the Future programme because it was a politically driven programme funded by the discredited public finance initiative, which made it extremely expensive. I do not think we should go back there.

The Labour party does not actually criticise what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State decided last week to protect the safety of schoolchildren and teachers. That was the subject of my intervention on the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson). Does she think that the Secretary of State has done the wrong thing? I will give way to her now if she would like to say that.

Bridget Phillipson: I am not Secretary of State.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: No, but the point is that this debate arises because the Secretary of State made a brave and courageous decision to act on the advice she was given. The Opposition has nothing whatever to say about that. She did the right thing. [Interruption.] If the shadow Secretary of State wants to intervene, by all means she may.

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Gentleman would do well to show a little humility for the mess that his party has created right across our schools.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: There we have it: the hon. Lady will not say that the Secretary of State has done the wrong thing. Let the politics play itself out.

What we have here is a much more fundamental, wider systemic failure in the management of building safety, which has gone on for decades. Dr John Roberts, the former president of the Institution of Structural Engineers, wrote in *The Times* earlier this week:

"As a chartered structural engineer in active practice from the early 1970s, I never considered using RAAC as it did not "feel" correct for permanent structures."

So why was it used? One lesson is that perhaps Ministers should encourage their officials to challenge them more with uncomfortable truths—let us agree that.

The wider question is why such a critical building safety issue was systemically neglected, decade after decade. We should thank the good Lord that none of the ceilings collapsed on a classroom of pupils, or the Government would by now be announcing a full public inquiry rather like the Grenfell inquiry. There the parallels continue, because like cladding, RAAC is a long-persisting and neglected building safety risk, which successive Governments have failed to address.

I and others, including the former fire and housing Minister Nick Raynsford, the former chief investigator of the Air Accident Investigation Branch Dr Keith Conradi, and senior buildings surveyor Kevin Savage, made a submission to the Grenfell inquiry. Our recommendations to help to address the failings are principally twofold and relate to unresolved conflicts of interest in the building safety management regime of buildings, which are not addressed by the Building Safety Act 2022 or the establishment of the building safety body, which is now a statutory function of the Health and Safety Executive. At present, it is the HSE—

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: No, I will press on, if I may. At present, it is the HSE that decides how a building safety failure should be investigated, unless the Government take over with their own inquiry.

There is a need for a truly independent building safety investigation body, equivalent to the accident investigation bodies in aviation, marine, rail and offshore safety. No regulator like the HSE should also investigate safety failures, because it may find itself conflicted if part of the failure arises from a failure of regulation. That is what Lord Cullen found in the Paddington rail crash inquiry and why the Rail Accident Investigation Branch of the Department for Transport was established.

Ian Lavery: Will the hon. Member give way?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I am sorry; I have no time.

The second conflict that needs to be resolved concerns the role of local authority building control bodies and their private sector counterparts, known as approved inspectors. The Building Safety Act will regulate the private sector approved inspectors but not local authority building control, which was not only responsible for approving the cladding on Grenfell Tower but, I hazard a guess, probably approved the building control on most of the schools built with RAAC.

The main point is that failures such as RAAC and cladding arise because of the failure of the building management safety system, which is endemic to that system. The failures also arise from the failure to find the causes of building safety incidents through a proper independent investigation body that possesses permanent, accumulated expertise that a one-off-public inquiry has to attempt to acquire from scratch.

I hope that amid the politicking, all political parties will recognise that such reforms are necessary in building safety management, or there will be more systemic failures in building safety arising from things such as the wrong cladding and the wrong concrete in the future. I have 15 seconds, if the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) would like to intervene.

Ian Lavery: Very briefly, does the hon. Member think that the Government's 54% reduction in the HSE budget since 2010 is helpful in this situation?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I had hoped that the hon. Gentleman would raise a point relevant to my speech. There has been enough politicking about this issue. I am making more serious comments about the building safety management system of this whole country, which affects a whole lot of other public buildings as well.

3.17 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I fear I will upset the Chair of the Liaison Committee, the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), because I will use my speech to blame the Government. The Secretary of State must be the only scouser I have ever met who thinks Liverpool is left better after the last 13 years of Conservative government. It has been evident to my constituents for many years that our public services are crumbling under the Tory Government. Never has that phrase been so literal as it has become in the last few days.

Just days before schools were set to reopen after the summer holidays, our education system was thrown into chaos by the crisis of unsafe concrete in our public buildings. More than 100 schools have already been forced to close due to the risk of collapse. The Prime Minister himself suggested that more than 1,000 could

be affected. This scandal goes to the heart of the incompetence and short termism that has characterised the last 13 years.

The emerging timeline of events is truly staggering: upon taking office in 2010, the Tory-Liberal Democrat Government scrapped Labour's school rebuilding programme, which the then Education Secretary called a waste of money. Department for Education officials said that 300 to 400 schools needed to be rebuilt every single year because of degrading concrete, but the Government said they would only pay for 100. In 2018, the Department was informed of the sudden collapse of a roof on a school in Kent. Since summer 2021, its own risk register recognised a critical and very likely risk that building collapse could cause death or injury. Officials in the Department again asked for funding for school rebuilds to be doubled. Instead, the then Chancellor, now Prime Minister, recklessly cut school funding in half. Now our schools, the bedrock of our society, are literally potentially collapsing around us and the Tory Government have the audacity to expect gratitude.

Today, Labour will force a binding vote to reveal what the Prime Minister knew about the risks posed by reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete before slashing the school rebuilding programme. Conservative MPs have a choice: stand with those of us on the Labour Benches and let parents know the truth, or stand with the Government and cover up what was known and the scale of the crisis.

The crumbling concrete in schools, hospitals and courts is a fitting metaphor for Tory rule and the years of neglect of public services across the country. After 13 years of a Conservative-led Government, Britain is falling apart. Our NHS is on the verge of collapse, our railways are in chaos, raw sewage is being pumped into our rivers, and housing is unaffordable and insecure. My constituents say, election after election, that enough is enough. I hope the rest of the country will follow suit shortly. We need nothing short of a national renewal, and Labour stands ready to take office and begin the difficult task of rebuilding Britain for the better.

3.21 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Unlike some, I welcome the opportunity to follow up Monday's statement from the Government Front Bench and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to discuss RAAC. More than 50 schools in Essex are affected, and I begin by paying tribute to Essex County Council and its leadership: Councillor Kevin Bentley, Councillor Tony Ball and officers led by Claire Kershaw. They have been robust in their leadership and are doing so much to help parents, teachers and pupils. I should add that our council is working not just with local authority schools, but academy trusts too. They are not saying that it will help one school over another. They are stepping up to deal with the challenge and we are grateful to them.

I commend them for convening Essex MPs. Madam Deputy Speaker, my right hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Dame Eleanor Laing), has also raised concerns on behalf of her schools directly with the county council, as has the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon). He has a school that is affected: Sir Frederick Gibberd

[Priti Patel]

College. We are working together because we believe in finding solutions. We are not interested in politicking at this time.

I want to thank parents and pupils in Essex for understanding the difficulties we are all facing. They have been inconvenienced by the RAAC issue, but it is important to point out that, certainly in my constituency, community groups and businesses have come forward to help find alternative provision and sites. I thank them too. The focus right now has to be on finding solutions to the immediate challenges we are facing, minimising disruption to learning, and ensuring affected pupils, parents and schools are supported. I do not think they are interested in political point scoring; they want answers and solutions.

I will use my time to put some questions to those on the Government Front Bench, and I know they will come back on them in due course. I welcome from the Minister the details of the steps that have been taken across Government to mobilise the strong operational—that is the whole point—delivery response we want. The Prime Minister gave an assurance earlier that all funding necessary will be provided, including capital and revenue. That is important because our county council is already liaising, co-ordinating and covering costs in the interim. It will be sending in an invoice, and we hope it will come to the Department for Education. The council will, of course, need to know when those costs will be met and who in the Department it will be liaising with, so I would like some assurances on that.

We have concerns about the impact on learning. I have raised—I raised it on Monday in this House—concerns around children with special needs, disabilities and vulnerabilities, and the impact of missed learning on parents, with difficulties around childcare. We are looking at finding practical solutions, so I would welcome any update from the Front Bench on that, too. We will need to think about how the impact, particularly on exams and Ofsted inspections, will be managed. It is inevitable, post pandemic, that we will see more Ofsted inspections locally—I know that from my own schools—but we have key year groups in exam years and we have to support them.

On temporary measures being put in place, all Members will be concerned about the pressures on the market and the demands for portable classrooms and facilities. The Secretary of State and I have already spoken about those demands and the potentially increased costs, so it would be helpful for the Government to give a supply update. Alongside the pressure of supply for temporary classrooms is the impact on the construction sector and extra insurance costs and premiums. Schools and the local authority will be looking at those issues and quality control measures.

This has already been touched on in the debate and over the past few days, but issues other than RAAC are affecting our schools, and I have raised them in the past, such as damp and old buildings that are worn out and need updating and replacing. Perhaps not today—this is an Opposition day debate—but we will need an update on what this all means for us going forward.

Finally, this is a difficult and challenging time for teachers, schools, pupils and parents. On behalf of all of those affected in the Witham constituency, Essex and the whole country, today is a chance for the Government

to give an assurance that they will do everything possible to ensure that face-to-face education can come back for affected schools and that we are doing everything we can to support them.

3.26 pm

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): Earlier today the Prime Minister said that he had acted decisively on RAAC. Earlier this week, the Secretary of State said that schools in which critical RAAC had been identified had been fixed immediately. As we have come to expect from this Government, neither of those statements are true. Critical RAAC was identified at St James Catholic Primary School in my constituency in June and action was not taken immediately—or, indeed, at all. It was told that it could open in part and then, as with many other schools, it received just 24 hours' notice that it had to close in full.

Schools would not be in this position had the Government acted decisively. They have known RAAC was unsafe since 2018, and they could and should have taken action much earlier. Decades of cutting money from vital public services has literally left buildings crumbling and left our kids at risk, sitting in unsafe buildings. The Government's decisions have left all our public services on their knees, not just our schools but crumbling hospitals and courts. It is not just the buildings: whole services have collapsed.

Staff, too, are being failed: workers in schools, the NHS and local government have all been left propping up services. Huge increases in workload, coupled with real-terms pay cuts, have also left public sector workers at the point of collapse. We know that the Government's rhetoric on levelling up is yet more untruths and we know why: the Prime Minister boasting about moving money from poorer areas to richer areas, cutting tax on champagne, spending millions on new offices while our northern communities like Hebburn, Boldon, Jarrow and Gateshead in my constituency are left behind. It does not surprise me to see so many of my colleagues from the north-east present today.

Communities are neglected and left paying the price of Tory chaos while Ministers, their spouses and their cronies get richer. Conservative Members attempt to gaslight the country into believing that everything is okay, but despite their panto screaming during Prime Minister's questions, they know the reality: that 13 years of Tory Governments has ruined our country. From the cost of living crisis and food and energy bills to our waters, schools and NHS, every part of our country is falling down.

The Secretary of State likes to keep saying that decisions were “nothing to do with me”, but the fact that our schools and the country are falling apart is absolutely down to the Government. At this moment, thousands of parents are petrified because of this crisis, while we have a Prime Minister and a Secretary of State with feet of clay. They need to accept that their time is up, and move aside so that the Labour party can start clearing up the mess that they have caused.

3.29 pm

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): No Member of Parliament would dispute the crucial importance of safe and secure school premises—or indeed all vital premises, whether those are hospitals, courts or prisons—or

the fact that they require adequate Government investment. Implicit in the Opposition motion, however, is an allegation that the Conservative Government have failed on education, and failed children more broadly, and that is a charge that I do not accept—nor, in fact, do some of Labour's most revered figures. Philip Collins, writing in *The Times* on Monday, said:

"The core case for the government would be in education. Its emphasis on academic knowledge has been salutary."

He goes on to say that the Conservative

"free school programme created productive experiments in school improvement."

I can attest to that, because I sent my kids to a free school. He continues:

"The stress on phonics to teach reading"—

introduced in 2010 by the Schools Minister—

"has worked. In 2012, 58 per cent of Year 1 pupils achieved the expected reading level. By 2019, that had risen to 82 per cent."

Members must be familiar with this by now, but in this year's progress in international reading literacy study, an international five-yearly assessment, the UK ranked fourth globally and first in the western world for child literacy. The proportion of schools rated good or outstanding by Ofsted has increased from two thirds in 2010, when we came to office, to 90% today. Time is limited, so I will not go on, but the fact is that the quality of children's education has never been higher because of the reforms introduced by this Conservative Government.

Let me now deal with the issue of buildings. There were good aspects of Labour's Building Schools for the Future programme. St Bartholomew's School in my constituency was rebuilt as a result of that programme, and I give Labour credit for that. However, the private finance initiative programme was badly lacking. The National Audit Office noted that the building was a third more expensive than it needed to be, and that is not in dispute. The independent James review said in 2011 that Building Schools for the Future had been "time consuming" and

"had an approach that, with hindsight, was expensive and did not get to schools with the greatest need fast enough."

Given the dire state of the public finances when we came to office, it was right to shelve that scheme. I know that that the note left by the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), does the rounds on social media, and Labour Members will groan, but it still blows my mind that a senior member of the last Labour Government thought it was a joke that they had run down the public finances in that way. To them, the interests of the public were somehow derisory, and secondary to the primary objective of thumbing their nose at the incoming Conservative Government who had just won a general election.

I entirely disagree with the claim that the Conservatives have put nothing in place of that programme. In the three and a half years in which I have represented my constituency, a brilliant new primary school, Highwood Copse, has opened in the south of Newbury. Two more, Francis Baily Primary and Whiteland Park Primary in Thatcham, have received significant funds for badly needed overhauls. Three secondary schools, Trinity, Park House and Kennet, have also received significant funds; in fact, only one secondary school has not received money. John O'Gaunt, a secondary in Hungerford, was

one of the 239 schools selected for funding from the Government's £1.8 billion school rebuilding programme in September. I have watched school premises in my constituency improve significantly, so I know that the money is there.

Finally, I want to align myself with what was said by the Chair of the Education Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker). I know from working closely with my local headteachers that they need information and transparency. I respect the Secretary of State for taking a difficult decision in the light of information that became available, but I would also say that the information published today reveals a more positive picture than was first feared. More than 100 of the 156 schools affected—less than 0.5% of the total of 22,000 in the country—are already back in operation, and running face-to-face teaching. Only four are currently online. I do not like online teaching; it did not work very well for my kids. I understand from what the Prime Minister said that we are talking about a matter of days or weeks, so I ask the Secretary of State for transparency and a clear timeline for those schools.

The shadow Secretary of State for Education said that the symbol of 13 years of a Conservative Government was children cowering under concrete blocks, but the enduring image of 13 years of a Conservative Government is higher levels of academic excellence than have ever been achieved by any Government, and that would be impossible under anyone other than the Conservatives.

3.34 pm

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): In the week of the first anniversary of a prime ministerial reign that was outlasted by a lettuce, we again see laid bare the staggering incompetence of this Conservative Government. Mortgage holders, private renters and those looking to get on the housing ladder bore the brunt of that debacle; this time it is children, parents and teachers who are paying the price for the Government's failures—and failures do not get much bigger than this.

The Prime Minister's decision to slash the number of schools to be rebuilt, reportedly against the advice of officials, has left classrooms up and down the country unsafe to learn in. Taxes on many parents have never been higher; it is not unreasonable for them to expect that their children could go to a school that was not at risk of crumbling around them, yet the Conservatives seemingly disagree with that not especially lofty aspiration. They want my constituents to thank them for doing a good job as vital public services are quite literally run into the ground.

My experience of the Conservatives' school shambles came at quarter to 5 last Friday, when I received a letter from the same Secretary of State who wants to be patted on the back for doing a good job because she knows where the affected settings are. In that letter, she advised me that an education provider with many sites across Greater Manchester had a confirmed case of RAAC at its site in my constituency. Assuming an error, as I was previously unaware of any issues, I called the MPs' hotline to confirm whether the affected site was indeed in my constituency. The adviser was adamant that it was, despite my protestations. It was only when I spoke to the principal of the site in my constituency that it became clear that the site was completely fine, and that there was no RAAC involved at all.

[Andrew Western]

The Secretary of State is nodding. The site referred to was 15 miles away in another constituency and was a different part of the same group. For this to happen once would be bad, but for it to happen twice in the same letter—this is a comedy of errors from a Secretary of State who supposedly knows where the affected buildings are—is deeply concerning. Of the four schools that I was notified were at risk from RAAC, one is not even in my constituency. This is just a glimpse of the chaos and incompetence that has characterised the past week. If the Secretary of State is leaning into her knowledge of where the problems are as an example of her efficacy, I suggest that she rethinks her strategy.

Countless schools are now in limbo, with headteachers being told that they have suspected issues with RAAC but will have to wait weeks for a survey to confirm it. What a horrible position to put school leaders in. Should they tell parents about suspected RAAC issues and risk causing unnecessary panic, or should they say nothing to parents about their children learning in a potentially unsafe building? Had the Conservatives not cancelled Labour's school rebuilding programme in 2010, every secondary school building in England would have been significantly refurbished or rebuilt by 2020. Instead, the defining image of this Government will be children sitting in unfit buildings, worried that the ceilings could literally crumble above them.

If the Conservatives want any credibility on education, they should vote with Labour today to release the documents showing what the Prime Minister knew, when he was Chancellor, about the risks posed to children from RAAC before he slashed school rebuilding programmes in 2021, and when he knew it. For Members who think that parents, children and school staff deserve answers on who is responsible for this mess and have a right to know the true scale of this crisis, there is only one way to vote today, and that is to support this motion.

3.39 pm

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate. I have a school in my constituency that is affected by RAAC, Wood Green Academy, and I pay tribute to James Topham, its headteacher, who has done a fantastic job of swinging into action by staggering start times and ensuring, as best as possible, that education can continue. I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for Schools for working with me over the weekend and in the early part of this week to address that situation. I know his officials have followed the issue closely and will continue to do so.

The frustration for Wood Green Academy is that its two affected blocks house specialist classrooms for design and technology, and for other important, specialist parts of the curriculum that we need to support, particularly in my constituency, to ensure the participation of students. I pay tribute to the school for its work to minimise disruption.

In listening to this debate, it has been nice to hear that the Opposition finally remember where Wednesbury is. For the benefit of Labour Members, it is about 12 miles from Birmingham, which is the council they bankrupted

yesterday. Wednesbury is in Sandwell, where the council was put into special measures because there was a lack of transparency and borderline corruption in the way that Labour was running the authority. Wednesbury is also about 40 miles from Stoke-on-Trent, which has just said it has gone bankrupt, too. I will not take lectures from Labour Members on chaos.

We need to look at the bigger picture. My hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) gave a fantastic speech, and I pay tribute to the measured way in which she tackled this issue. The issue of funding has been at the heart of some of the Opposition's lines today, but the shame and scandal of Labour's PFI programme continues to haunt my community. I hope that when the Minister sums up, he will confirm that if schools with PFI contracts are impacted in any way by the need for emergency remediation, we will consider ways to resolve the issues caused.

One of my headteachers has had to choose between buying books and paying £20,000 to get the grass cut—that is the legacy of Labour's school building programme, and this is in the most deprived community possible. Labour Members sit there and they gaslight, with this arrogance that winds up the communities I represent. All they have done is turn their back on those communities; it is as simple as that. Every single Labour Member should apologise for the legacy of PFI, because it is scandalous—absolutely scandalous. Once again, it is my constituents who will have to suffer for half a century because they lot decided to play fast and loose, however they wished. It is absolutely outrageous.

We have to look to the future, and the truth is that Government funding, particularly in my constituency, has been quite generous. Last year, there were announcements of condition improvement funding for Silvertrees Academy and Ocker Hill Academy, both in Tipton, in some of the most deprived and needy parts of my community. We have also seen a 28% cash increase in the basic needs allowance for 2022-23. To say that there has been a slashing of funding and capital investment is a narrative that my communities simply do not recognise.

The technical points of the motion are important. As I said when we debated a similar motion earlier this year, the House has mechanisms that we can use to allow for the scrutiny that the motion suggests. My hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), the Chair of the Select Committee, is no longer here, but he touched on that. As the Secretary of State said, and as former Ministers know, although I am unfortunately not one of them, it is important that Ministers be able to take discreet advice from their officials, so that they can make the right decisions without fear that officials who cannot stand up for themselves will be put at the forefront of scrutiny. I cannot support the motion, because it undermines a process that Labour Members used themselves when they were in government—please help us if that ever happens again. I find it hilarious that they think that the motion proposes a viable process that would not set a precedent in any way, shape or form.

Let me get to the heart of this: we need transparency. I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for Schools for the work that he has done. We clearly have to look at the matter from an operational point of view, and at the core of it is making sure that children get the education they deserve.

3.44 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I support the motion, which stands in the names of my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) and the Leader of the Opposition. It is interesting to follow the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey). May I just correct him by saying that PFI was started by the Conservative Major Government?

As pupils, parents and teachers were preparing for a new school term last week and this week, they were met with horrifying news that threw into question whether their schools were safe to go into. Headteachers were left scrambling around over the weekend to arrange new sites and portacabins, or, worse, telling parents that their children were not to come into school this week.

Sir Bernard Jenkin *rose*—

Ruth Cadbury: I will not give way, as I know there are quite a few people to speak.

Schools have been rushing to book surveys to find out whether they have RAAC. This is a week when parents should be filled with joy and excitement about a new year, taking photos of their year 7s in their new uniform, not worrying about how to find holiday childcare for another week—or two weeks, who knows?

This situation did not happen by accident. Conservative Members like to pretend that the past 13 years were a fever dream, but this crisis stems primarily from the decision made in 2010 to cancel Labour's Building Schools for the Future scheme. It was a massive and historic programme of investment. That investment would have benefited schools in my constituency and across England: schools that had RAAC; schools that have asbestos; and schools that had had little serious investment over the previous 18 years of Conservative government prior to 1997. In 2010, the Conservatives cancelled that programme because they do not know the value of investment or the role of public services, and did not care about the condition of our schools. The Prime Minister is so out of touch with the country that he struggles to use a contactless card machine. What hope do we have that he might really understand UK state schools?

When the Prime Minister was Chancellor, he made the decision to block extra funding to the Department for Education—funding that would have gone towards fixing, repairing and improving our school estate. One of the most senior civil servants in that Department even admitted that funding for school buildings was blocked because the Government wanted to push more towards free schools. For example, that involved paying £11.25 million of taxpayers' money—way overpaying—for a former sports facility on old metropolitan open land in Osterley. Once again, the Conservative ideology trumps value for money and public safety.

We live in a country where ambulances do not turn up, the police have to be ordered to investigate crime and school buildings now face collapse. Thirteen long years of Conservative rule have utterly ruined our public services. There is no more fitting legacy than the fact that the public realm is literally collapsing in front of us. The letter I received from the DFE on Monday says that

“there is nothing more important than the safety of children, young people, and staff in education settings”.

Even if that were the view of officials within the DFE, it clearly was not the view of the Prime Minister, who was Chancellor in 2021 when the Government knew about this problem—indeed, there had been warnings long before that. If the Government really thought that there was nothing more important than the safety of children, young people and staff in education settings, why are schools collapsing and why are children being told to say at home this week?

Hon. Members have a choice today: they can vote with Labour and give parents the right to know who is responsible for this mess, or they can vote to conceal the true scale of the crisis and the Prime Minister's failure to keep our children safe.

3.48 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I am grateful for the chance to speak in the debate, following the statement made by the Secretary of State for Education earlier this week.

I draw the attention of colleagues on both sides of the House to the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris)—this is bad timing on my part, as she is just leaving the Chamber—about the legacy of this Government on education, which is something to be proud of. I will not use my time to repeat her points, but when I post on my Facebook page later, I will add a link to her speech so that all my constituents can see it too.

In 13 years of Conservative government, standards have gone through the roof. My right hon. Friend the Schools Minister and others in government should be proud of that and trumpet it at every possible opportunity. I can point to recent examples in my own constituency, including Queen Elizabeth's Academy, Oak Tree Primary School and Vision West Nottinghamshire College, that have gone through difficult times in terms of quality but are rated “good”, some for the first time ever, because of incredible amounts of local work and a drive for higher standards and better opportunities for kids in my constituency from this Government. No one should let anybody tell them that the Conservatives do not care about kids, education or schools because that is demonstrably nonsense.

In the debate, Labour Members have been asking for information that they would never release themselves. If the shoe were on the other foot, they would never allow that to happen and they would vote against such a motion. They know perfectly well that there has to be the ability to have a confidential conversation behind the scenes when budgets are set, because otherwise no ideas would ever come forward and no plans would ever be made. The Government are releasing information about schools in England, which is being published today, but that cannot be done for schools in Wales because Labour-run Wales does not have that information, as work to mitigate the challenge has not been done.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State had very little choice last week when she made the decision. There is no choice about when expert advice comes forward and changes the balance of risk. She had to take a risk averse, safety-first approach. That was absolutely the right thing to do. The immediate response has been very good. I felt her frustration yesterday, because this work has not just happened in the last week but has been going on for years. The Department for Education

[Ben Bradley]

took a decision, identified the schools, supported those schools and committed the funds to tackle the problem. That happened fairly quickly and the outcome, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury said, is that fewer schools are affected than was originally thought last week. That is something of a success.

The history of the issue goes back several years. The idea raised by Opposition Members that the problem emerged only last week or in 2022 is nonsense. I am the leader of a county council, the responsible body for maintained schools in my constituency and around it. We have been doing survey work with the DFE since 2018-19, so it has been ongoing for a long time. There have been local and national condition improvement funds to work on the quality of those schools in that time. As a result, when the announcement was made last week, we had very good data and information to be able to tackle the situation quickly.

The sum total of affected schools in Nottinghamshire—there are no affected schools in my constituency—is one primary school being delayed in its return by a couple of days. That is not an accident; it has happened because a lot of work, funding and support has gone in over a long period of time. In places where that has not happened, the DFE stepped in directly in 2022, which was a good and responsible thing to do. I pay tribute to the work of colleagues in the Department and in my own council who have managed this well over a number of years. We have a local £9-million school condition improvement fund of our own and four schools in my constituency are being rebuilt. These are all good news stories for schools, not just because of the quality of education I have described, but for school buildings in my constituency and around it.

The level of building—500 new schools over a decade—is consistent with any programme in recent decades. The numbers under the programme that Labour Members are lauding ended up being something like 25 or 30 fewer than that. They never reached the target they said they were going to reach—shock, horror! This problem was an issue back in 1997 to 2010, but it was never mentioned at any point. They tell us now that if they had been in government, they would have used their psychic powers to figure out the problem before the experts did and would have tackled it well in advance. Of course we know that that is not true or possible.

The biggest concern I want to raise is about reassurance. I have heard three times from Opposition Members that schools are literally falling down around our children—name one, because they are not. Each time I hear that, I am reminded that I will be getting emails from my constituents saying, “I am worried about my kids’ safety in their school,” when no schools are affected in my constituency, they do not need to worry and those kids have all gone back—every single one—safely to school this week. That fearmongering and rhetoric is irresponsible. Parents will be unnecessarily worried about the condition of their kids’ school when I know, for all the reasons I have described, that we have managed this well over a number of years and it is not an issue in my constituency. I urge hon. Members to think long and hard before they put that unnecessary stress on parents who are already finding this difficult.

3.54 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I thank those on the Opposition Front Bench for selecting this urgent issue today and my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) for her opening remarks.

Today’s debate will mean a lot to my constituents, many of whom have been thrown into disarray because of this avoidable scandal. How Tory Back Benchers vote this afternoon will show those constituents just whose side they are on: the side of parents, teachers and pupils, or the side of this rotten Government who need to go.

My constituents want two things today. First, they want Ministers to know exactly what they had to go through when St Leonard’s Catholic School in my constituency was ordered to close last Friday. Secondly, they want to know what the Government are doing for them and their children, so that this crisis does not become a disaster.

I mentioned in my contribution on Monday that the closure of St Leonard’s caused real difficulty and distress for my constituents. They understand that this is not the fault of St Leonard’s, which, by the way, had lobbied the Schools Minister in the coalition years about its crumbling school, but they do know that this is the fault of Conservative Ministers past and present.

On Friday, at the last minute, childcare and work had to be rearranged, all against a backdrop of austerity and the cost of living crisis. One of my constituents could not afford to take time off work, so they had to ask their parent to take time off to look after their child. Parents have told me that this has caused their children anxiety and frustration—children who have already been through so much because of the disruption of the pandemic. Parents have also written to me to express how horrified they are that they have been sending their children to an unsafe school. They are perplexed about why the school could not have closed earlier—after all, RAAC was identified in the spring and we have had an entire school holiday to repair this mess.

Parents and children alike are extremely concerned by the effect that this situation may have on GCSE results. There is already a grade attainment gap due to inequality between the north-east and the rest of the country—something my constituents know all too well—which further compounds their anxiety.

I should say, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I have heard more practical ideas from my constituents than I have from Ministers or the local council, which has been absent throughout this crisis. Even in a time of great stress, parents are thinking of ways to help their children and their children’s friends, as is Durham University, which has been of great assistance to my office since last Friday. The same cannot be said of Ministers, who are more concerned with inter-departmental arguments between No. 10 and the Department for Education.

The Education Secretary told me on Monday that there would be financial support for St Leonard’s, but will support also be offered to the parents and pupils who have been affected? Will additional travel costs be reimbursed? Will the Department meet extra staff costs? Will the Department meet all the capital costs, or will

St Leonard's be expected to pay? And will the Education Secretary return to the House next week to outline a support package? I am mainly thinking of those parents of children with special educational needs, as well as children on free school meals. A teacher at St Leonard's has told me that they are most concerned about the impact on those children from vulnerable backgrounds, for whom school is a safe haven.

Conservative Members must do the right and honourable thing this afternoon and join us in the Lobby. If they do not, they will have no right to ever say that they are on the side of hard-working parents, pupils or teachers.

3.58 pm

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): The education of the next generation is an issue that is close to my heart, as is the case for Members across the House—on that we can agree this afternoon. It is our duty to ensure that children can study with minimal disruptions. I strongly support the measures that the Secretary of State has taken to address the issue of RAAC in schools throughout England.

I wish to highlight three of those measures. The first is that the Government have acted quickly to issue guidance to schools on how to manage the risks associated with RAAC, which is in sharp contrast to what the Welsh Government have done. In 2018, the Department for Education published guidance for schools about the need to have adequate contingencies if they had RAAC. It initiated its survey of the schools estate for RAAC in March 2022 and updated the guidance in light of new evidence last month.

The second point that I will make is that the UK Government will ensure that schools have the funding that they need so that teachers can focus on getting students back to school, and so that students are safe. The Chancellor and the Prime Minister have confirmed that the Government will spend what it takes to address the problem as quickly as possible so that children can go to school safely.

The third point that I will emphasise is that the Government are ensuring that the majority of schools affected by RAAC remain open for face-to-face teaching, minimising the disruption to students' learning. By supporting schools to put mitigations in place, the Government have helped the majority of schools to remain open for face-to-face teaching, ensuring that disruption to pupils in affected schools is minimised. In contrast, the Opposition are playing politics and refusing to take responsibility for their failings in Government. They failed to address issues with RAAC, despite warnings about the problems in 1997, 1999, 2002 and 2007 from the Building Research Establishment and the Standing Committee on Structural Safety.

Finally, as a Welsh MP for Clwyd South I make no apology for commenting on the situation in Wales. I note that no Welsh MPs have taken part in the debate or been present on the Opposition Benches this afternoon. The Welsh Government have taken their eye off the ball, relying on councils to do the work that the UK Conservative Government are leading on in England. As I said in my earlier intervention, the Welsh Government ordered surveys only in May 2023; the UK Government started engaging with schools in March 2022. Where is the accountability? Where is the responsibility?

That lack of preparation work means that school surveys in Wales will not be completed until December this year. Education has been devolved to Wales for 26 years. Labour is in charge of schools in Wales, so building safety is its responsibility. The Welsh Government receive £1.20 for every £1 spent on education in England, but in 2019 the independent Auditor General for Wales discovered that only £1.05 reaches the classroom. Labour prioritises its vanity projects, such as a new blanket 20 mph speed limit, costing the economy £4.5 billion, and introducing legislation for more politicians in the Welsh Parliament, but it has cut the education budget in Wales in real terms this year. The Welsh Government's approach to RAAC shows a woeful lack of responsibility by the Labour party in Wales, of which they and those on the Opposition Benches should be deeply ashamed.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): A couple of people have dropped out, which gives us a little more time. I will remove the time limit for a bit and see how we go. I may have to reinstate it, but a little more time is available.

4.2 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): While it is welcome that it has been reported today that RAAC has not been found in any of our schools in Salford, I must stress that the fact that the Government were unable to produce that information until today, having known about the risk since at least 2018, when a school roof in Kent collapsed, is completely unacceptable.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): I am glad that Salford has no schools with RAAC problems, but in Bolton we found out on Friday that St William of York, St Andrew's Church of England and St Bernard's were affected. St Bernard's was not even on any list, and St Gregory's is still awaiting the result. Do you agree that the Government should publish the full list, not the half-baked one that they published this afternoon?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Lady knows that she must not address her hon. Friend as "you"; otherwise, she is addressing me.

Yasmin Qureshi: I apologise.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I completely agree with my constituency neighbour. I stress that not just schools are affected by this crisis; it extends to public buildings, and concerns have been raised in recent days by the building industry that certain residential properties, particularly social housing, could also be affected. On hospitals alone, a report by the National Audit Office in July this year said that structurally unsound RAAC was present in at least 41 hospitals. The Turnberg building at Salford Royal Hospital is reported to be one of them.

Despite this clear national building safety crisis, there is no detail from Government on what action will or will not be taken, no detail on the urgent funding and support that will be provided to remediate and no assurances so far that the costs will not come out of existing school, NHS and local authority budgets. Worse still, there appears to be an emerging message today from Government that this crisis is stand-alone—that it is simply a sad indictment of less-regulated old building practices that are now outdated.

[Rebecca Long Bailey]

That is not the true story. The real culprit here is the unashamed pursuit of austerity by this Government and the coalition before them. Let us not forget that, to start with, the coalition ripped up Labour's Building Schools for the Future programme in 2010 and never adequately replaced it. Worse still, between 2009 and 2022 the Department for Education's capital spending declined by 37% in cash terms and 50% in real terms. That is in addition to NHS and local authority budgets being slashed on a similar basis, with the effect that most ongoing public sector estate upgrade programmes were torn to shreds.

Sadly, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies states:

"The current crisis illustrates just how costly failing to keep on top of necessary investment in buildings and infrastructure can be."

How much money was actually required, had the Government taken action on schools when it should have? The National Audit Office in 2017 published a report on capital spending that stated that it would cost £6.7 billion to return all schools to a satisfactory or better condition. That report was also clear that there is a significant risk of major costs arising from deterioration of the estate.

Action was needed in 2017, but in November 2020, in the Government spending review, they allocated only £3.1 billion—less than half the amount of investment required just to keep buildings ticking over safely. Then the story becomes even more absurd: in March 2022, realising that there was a problem, the Department for Education sent a questionnaire to all schools asking if they had RAAC on their estate, but later told schools not to spend any money on surveys to find out.

Even after that, in May 2022, when Government documents were leaked to *The Observer* showing that school buildings could be a risk to life—causing great alarm in schools up and down the country—half the schools then applied for funding to remediate and did not get a penny from Government. In June 2023, the National Audit Office said the condition of school buildings was "declining" and warned that 700,000 pupils were learning in buildings that it described as unsafe or ageing. It stated clearly that the DfE had received significantly less funding for school buildings than it estimated it needed between 2016 and 2023.

The Government knew that this crisis was coming, and the causes of this crisis were very deliberate. Austerity is, was and always will be a political choice, but it is both immoral and economically illiterate. The only political choice the Government should have made was to ensure the safety of their people. Sadly, if they had made that choice, the cost borne then would be a mere shadow of the cost required today.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): To assist with guidance, I will put a seven-minute limit on.

4.8 pm

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), my fellow Science, Innovation and Technology Committee member.

We began this debate with a bit of a lecture from the shadow Education Secretary, who presumed to tell us what the nature of government was. Government involves

difficult decisions; it involves responding to events, but it also involves living within our means and prioritising the safety of the people we represent—in particular that of children. As other hon. Members have said in this debate, I honestly believe the Education Secretary had no other option: when the risk assessment changed, as a result of things that happened just in August, she took a rapid, proactive and very precautionary decision to make sure we addressed it in the most appropriate way possible. She demonstrated the wisdom of that approach in the responses she gave Members on both sides of the House during her statement on Monday.

When Labour is in charge of things, it does not always take that approach; it fails on all the things that I have mentioned. Labour fails in places such as Birmingham, where it has run out of money, and in neighbouring Stoke-on-Trent, which looks like it will go bankrupt as well; it has clobbered people with taxes in places such as London, where the Mayor and his ultra low emission zone are epically unpopular with voters and the hard-working families who have to pay that cost; and, of course, on this particular issue, Labour fails in Wales, where it has had its head in the sand.

I have looked at the BBC list of all the affected schools in England, Scotland and Wales. For Wales, there is a link to one article that says that only two affected schools were found, both in Anglesey. Well, in a construction scandal that has affected countries across the world, with all the buildings built with RAAC over the years, if there are only two in the whole of the Welsh education establishment, I will eat my hat. Two have been found in Anglesey, but Labour needs to get its fingers out and start finding the others as soon as possible.

Instead, the shadow Education Secretary indulges in the luxury of opposition. What have Labour Members focused on since this story broke? They want the list. Why do they want the list? They want to scaremonger and whip up a media storm about it. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth), who is no longer in her place, mentioned on Monday a special school in her constituency. The name of that school got into the press—presumably the local press—and the school was then mobbed by national media. That is presumably what Labour wants to happen in all cases.

One school in my constituency, Sir Thomas Boughy Academy in Halmer End, is on the list. That school is very instructive on why we are right to have taken the course that we have, because it has been proactive and, working with the dedicated caseworker provided by the DfE, has explained things to parents. In fact, the school has already taken much of the required action to repair the hall, classrooms and roof constructions in which it found RAAC. There is currently a small amount left in a boiler room, but it is being removed and the room has been made safe. That school is able to be open today with face-to-face teaching in all classrooms and no restrictions. Only that boiler room still has RAAC because the school took proactive action, and that shows the value of the work that the English Government—the UK Government—have been doing in getting that surveying ahead of time. That is not happening in Wales because Labour has not done the work.

We are proud of our record on education, and my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) spoke powerfully about that. Outputs matter most, but

on inputs, we are providing record funding in real terms, with a schools budget of nearly £60 billion next year. We have record numbers of teachers—468,000—and a teacher's starting salary is now an extremely competitive £30,000, delivering on a pledge that the Government made. On top of that, we are spending £181 million on initial teacher training incentives to get people into the areas in which we need to see more teachers, including maths and science. We on the Science and Technology Committee conducted an inquiry on diversity in science, technology, engineering and maths, and we considered the need for better teaching in science, particularly for girls. We are delivering that through teacher training incentives.

Outputs are more important, and our record is absolutely outstanding: 88% of schools are rated “good” or “outstanding” compared with the 68% figure that we inherited from the Labour party in 2010. An English 18-year-old from a disadvantaged background is now 86% more likely to go to university than they were a decade ago—I represent a number of disadvantaged communities—and I am proud of that record. Many of those people go to Keele University in my constituency.

Phonics is the absolute epic success story of this period of Conservative Government. I pay tribute to the Minister for Schools, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb), who is sat on the Treasury Bench. Our primary children are now the best in the western world at reading. We have rocketed up the league tables not just for reading and literacy, but for maths. We are proud of our record here in England. Sadly, the Scottish education system is not as good. By delivering what we have through phonics, we are giving children the best possible tools to succeed in a world in which they will need more and more of those tools.

In all honesty, given the amount of money that was available to Labour during the boom times for the City in the 1997-2010 Parliaments—of course, it then famously ran out—it should be ashamed of its record. Not only did Labour not deliver the Building Schools for the Future programme, about which Labour Members have spoken many times today, but it was a costly and slow scheme that did not deliver what it promised. More than that, Labour failed on outputs. It left children unable to read or write. We have put that right in our time in government.

I am very proud of what we have done on education. I think that we have reacted in a responsible way to the RAAC situation. As I said on Monday, I recognise that the timing is terrible. I pay tribute to Mrs Hingley and her staff at Sir Thomas Boughey Academy for what they have done to ensure that their school, like so many others on the list, remains open for full face-to-face teaching today. It is not the case that children are cowering in classrooms, which was an appalling thing for the shadow Education Secretary to say. What they are doing is learning, which is what they should be doing.

4.14 pm

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): It is a privilege to have the opportunity to contribute to this debate, but I must say that I am particularly disappointed by the tone with which it has started. This is a very serious issue: there are a high number of concerned

parents and teachers and headteachers who work in those buildings, and obviously, their primary concern is the children.

I would specifically point out the selective interpretation and opportunism shown by Labour Members, because they only have to look the other side of Offa's Dyke or the Prince of Wales Bridge to see what is happening in Wales. They forget that Labour has been in power in Wales for 26 years—if that has not been sufficient time to reform education and rebuild these buildings, I do not know how long they will need. Let us remember that education in Wales is entirely devolved. That gives the Administration the freedom to survey, assess and repair buildings, and rebuild them where necessary. Labour has been in power for 26 years, but the reality is that we still do not know the state of the buildings in Wales. That is the truth of the Labour Administration.

The synthetic anger we have heard from the Labour Benches has created an awful lot of hot air, but I can direct exactly the same questions and accusations at the Administration in Wales. They have been there for 26 years, but we still do not know. Can we imagine the synthetic anger that we would hear from Labour Front Benches, and Back Benches, if the Secretary of State or the Minister said today, “I am sorry, but we still do not know; it is going to take another couple of weeks”? There would be understandable outrage, but Labour Members are completely ignoring the situation and the state of the education service in Wales.

Yasmin Qureshi: The right hon. Gentleman is talking about Wales. Speaking as an English MP, the BBC is reporting that at least 13 schools with RAAC were set to be rebuilt under a Labour plan, but those building projects were scrapped by the Conservative-led Government in 2010. The former Secretary of State for Education, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), said that he scrapped that scheme because he did not want to “waste any more money”, and work on 700 schools was halted. Does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that that was an appalling thing for him to do?

Alun Cairns: With the greatest respect to the hon. Lady, I am not sure whether she is referring to Wales or to England. The point I am making is that Labour has been in power in Wales for 26 years. Two schools have been identified as having RAAC issues, but we simply do not know about the rest. There would be understandable anger and frustration if the Secretary of State or the Minister dared to come out with that response.

No Welsh Labour MP has participated in this debate, and up until now, none has even been present in the Chamber. Let us remember that the former First Minister in Wales said in relation to education that the Welsh Administration had taken their “eye off the ball”. I do not think their eye has ever been replaced on the ball, bearing in mind the standards in Wales.

Many colleagues on the Conservative Benches have listed a whole host of education outcomes and uplifts—my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) just went through a whole host of successes, and other colleagues have mentioned the number of good, excellent and outstanding schools here in England—but sadly, my constituents do not get the same benefits. Any international comparison, be it the programme for international student assessment or any other, shows that Wales has fallen back in comparison with England.

[Alun Cairns]

The Opposition day motion is opportunistic, as we have already highlighted, but let us at least humour it for a moment. When the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) responds for Labour, will she assure me that if my colleagues in the Welsh Senedd table this motion, Labour Members will support it? Exactly the same questions apply in Wales as in England, so I ask her to respond specifically to that question. I will happily give way if any Labour Front Benchers want to intervene now, but I notice that they are all keeping their heads down. They are frightened; I suggest that they are embarrassed to look at me, and to respond to the questions that we are raising.

The investigation started in England 18 months ago, and it started at a much later point in Wales. The reality is that we still do not know the outcome, and we have two weeks left to wait. I can imagine the anger that would be felt by Labour Members if that position was shared by my right hon. Friend the Minister. However, let us be realistic about this: new evidence comes to light and therefore new decisions need to be taken, and that is exactly what has happened in this situation. There is a whole host of Ministers, officials, teachers and parents co-ordinating efforts to make a real difference and get through this immediate challenge, much of which will be very short-term. This has been a long-standing problem, and there is a need for a whole host of quick decisions to be taken, as well as for transparency and for clarity.

Let me close my contribution with the comments of the Children's Commissioner for Wales. This is not from any party political person, but from an independent individual appointed by the Welsh Government. She has said that the statements issued by the Welsh Government Minister so far

"don't give families the clarity they need on what this means for them or the next steps for their school",

and on

"what exactly will happen over the next few weeks and reassurance that schools are safe."

That is from the Children's Commissioner for Wales, appointed with statutory responsibility to protect the interests of children, and even she has lost faith in the decision making, transparency and clarity of the Welsh Government.

Finally, will the shadow Minister reassure me that, if my friends or colleagues in the Senedd table this motion, Labour Members will support it?

4.21 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I rise to speak in this debate because I suspect I have mentioned RAAC on the Floor of the House more times than most since I was elected. Indeed, I have been banging on about this issue since my maiden speech three and a half years ago.

My focus has been on RAAC in the health sector and hospitals, particularly the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in King's Lynn. Unfortunately, it happens to be the most propped hospital in the country. It has many thousands of steel and timber support props in place, and they are there to keep the staff and patients safe. That failsafe work has been funded by the Government at a cost of tens of millions of pounds, as it has been in other hospitals. That demonstrates a commitment to address

RAAC issues in hospitals, as well as across the education sector, other parts of the public sector and public buildings.

I am delighted that the Health Secretary announced in May that the Queen Elizabeth Hospital and the other RAAC hospitals would be added to the new hospitals building programme, the biggest hospital building programme in history, and we will have a new hospital in King's Lynn by 2030. That really underlines the commitment of this Government to dealing with RAAC. I have discussed this directly with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on a number of occasions, as well as with his advisers and many Ministers.

Ironically, given the issues I have had locally in the NHS, I have not been notified so far of any issues of schools being affected in my constituency of North West Norfolk. When recent events occurred Ministers responded rapidly, and that has caused concern for pupils, parents and teachers, not least given the timing, which was not of course in the Minister's gift. I understand that concern well from my local hospital. Working around props and other support measures brings many challenges for staff and patients, as it will for teachers and pupils. Having had the new advice, work is now under way in schools to ensure that they remain safe spaces for children to learn and for staff to work. Other Members have attested to the rapid nature of the support provided by my right hon. Friend the Minister as well as by Baroness Barran and others in the Department.

In Norfolk, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) has an affected school. I know that he is supporting it to manage the issue, working closely with the Department for Education. As it and other schools across the country do that, it is right that the Chancellor has committed to spend whatever it takes to address these issues and to keep pupils safe.

We heard earlier during Prime Minister's questions about the increased spending that he approved for maintenance in the education budget in his previous role. I welcome that, and I welcome the extra £2 billion funding this year and next, given the pressure that schools are facing. That is vital to continue the major improvements that we have seen in literacy and other standards through our reforms, which my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) set out so ably. I also declare an interest as a governor of a school that is part of the school rebuilding programme—a programme that will deliver 500 new schools as well as dealing with maintenance and backlog issues.

I hope that the considerable expertise that exists in the Department of Health and Social Care, the NHS, other parts of Government, and externally, is being shared and made available to schools, advisers and local authorities, as well as co-ordinated through the Cabinet Office, so that other potentially affected sectors, such as our prisons estate and courts, also benefit from it.

Of course pupils, staff and parents at affected schools are concerned, and it is important that we tackle these issues in a serious and considered manner, and not by using some of the alarmist language we have heard today that will just create unnecessary concern. I know from issues that my hospital has faced—I am a regular visitor, talking to staff—how important it is for the confidence of staff and patients that we do this in a measured and responsible way, learning from what we know about RAAC in the NHS and elsewhere, and how

we have secured it. School leaders will always put the safety of their pupils first. We should ensure that they have all the support and resources they need to do that, and that is what this Government are doing.

4.26 pm

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): It is only day three of a new term, yet once again we find ourselves in the position of having an Opposition day debate on an incredibly important subject that is pure politicking from the Labour party. We have not heard anything new, other than what we heard at the beginning of the week when we devoted an hour and a half to a mature and sensible debate on this matter. I would have hoped that Labour Members would have spent the long summer recess reflecting that so often these debates make things worse, not better, because they frighten the public and spread confusion and misinformation. Sadly that has not been the case, and once again, today we have heard point scoring, misinformation and scaremongering.

I believe what the public want and deserve at this point is a responsible sense of risk and proportion about this problem. We know that 156 schools have been affected by RAAC, 52 of which—one third—already have mitigation measures in place. Only 104 schools were informed this week, which is under 0.5% of the 22,500 schools across the country. Some have been closed as a precaution, including one in my constituency that I will come on to talk about. The vast majority of schools in our country are not closed, and even some of those with RAAC have not been closed in their entirety. The majority are expected to open next week.

Unlike Labour Members, I wholeheartedly applaud this Government for putting the interests of pupils, families and staff first. The absolute last thing we could possibly want is for a disaster to happen in any one of our schools, but we should not be spreading fear or exaggerating the scale of this problem. It is recklessly irresponsible to scare children by suggesting that their schools are not safe, when they overwhelmingly are—99% of schools in this country are safe, and children have gone back and are learning in them.

Over the past 13 years, this Conservative Government have invested in their schools and school buildings. We have invested £28 billion since 2010. We have invested £15 billion since 2015, to improve the safety of our schools, with priority given to those with potential safety issues. Of course we are committed to go further than that, and as a member of the Education Committee, I have a strong focus on this area. According to the Commons Library, estimated capital spending in our schools for the past financial year—2022-23—is around £6.4 billion. That is a 29% real-terms increase compared with the year before. We are also undertaking a huge rebuilding and refurbishment programme to improve over 400 of our schools, including Blenheim Primary School in Southend, which very much welcomes being part of this programme. I am looking forward to seeing spades going into the ground. If I may, I remind the Schools Minister that he would be welcome to come to Blenheim Primary School to see that new refurbishment taking place.

Let us compare our record with Labour's record in government. Its Building Schools for the Future programme was slow, costly and substandard. That is an apt description, I would say, of the entire last Labour Government. In

2006, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment found that half the schools built by Labour were architecturally substandard, with a mere 4% being excellent. We need to understand not only exactly why RAAC was used in schools but, more importantly, how we can avoid anything like this happening in the future. We need to ask whether all the money that we are spending on remediation measures would not perhaps be spent more sensibly on rebuilding programmes. There is a range of things we need to look at, and that is why I called yesterday for a special session of the Education Committee looking into this issue. The point of that session is to learn and scrutinise, not to point fingers as the Labour party is seeking to do today.

In Essex, we are disproportionately affected by RAAC because we had such an extensive school building programme in the 1950s and 1960s. Sadly, in my constituency, the brilliant Kingsdown School is closed this week after RAAC was found in some of its buildings. Kingsdown School is the only special school in the country that has this problem, so the House will forgive me for dwelling on its issues in particular. It is waiting for three things. The first is the result of a risk assessment. The inspectors appropriately went in very quickly last week, but the school needs the results of that risk assessment if it is to open next week. It also needs emergency equipment in the form of portaloos, demountable classrooms and a portable staff room. Those things have been promised, and the sooner they are delivered, the better. The third thing is remediation measures, because these plans are short-term and the children in the school are among the most disabled, physically and mentally, in Southend, if not the south-east. This is a special school where some of the children need special feeding equipment or a special temperature. There are hoists everywhere. This is not a normal school, and these remediation measures are vital. It is a special school, and I make no apologies for arguing that it should be a special case.

I finish by applauding the work of the headmistress, Louise Robinson, who has been working around the clock along with Conservative-controlled Southend-on-Sea City Council; Councillor Helen Boyd, the cabinet member there; and Liz Hunt. They have been working hard to get things moving. The only thing that has not been helpful at all has been the press attention on this special school. The headmistress told me that she cannot pick up the telephone because the press are focusing on this school. That is appalling when one considers how anxious the parents and children must be. It is a completely inappropriate intrusion. I finish by reminding the Labour party that by calling today's debate—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Lady has run out of time.

4.33 pm

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): This is a concerning issue, and the amount of politicking and scaremongering of parents, teachers and pupils that the Opposition do on it worries me. Many schools and public buildings built with RAAC are characteristic of the brutalist style of architecture favoured between the '50s and '70s. The buildings were cheap and not built to last, and they popped up under various Governments. That shows the seemingly prevailing attitude of short-termism at the time; Governments knew it would be somebody else's problem in the future, as indeed it is now.

[Sara Britcliffe]

It must have been the same attitude that prevailed in 1997 and 2002, when a Labour Government took no action on RAAC, despite being warned about the dangers by the Building Research Establishment. My right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) stood at the Dispatch Box in the coalition era and criticised Labour's Building Schools for the Future programme for often targeting the wrong schools, and in the light of this week's evidence, it seems that he has been proven right, so I find the Opposition's outrage quite performative. The Department for Education, as I understand it, published guidance to schools on the topic in 2018.

I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker, but my back has just gone. I have a problem with my back. Carry on.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am sorry to hear that. I will move on to the next speaker, Munira Wilson.

4.35 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I do hope that the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe) is okay. I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the House for allowing me to go and lead a Westminster Hall debate just now; that is why I was out of the Chamber for 30 minutes. The crumbling concrete crisis is one that I first raised with the Secretary of State on the Floor of the House back in January. It is extremely damaging for several reasons. It is not just because anxious parents have had to tell their children why their schools are shut, or drive them to alternative sites. It is not just because children's learning has been disrupted yet again, with some eating lunch in marquees or going to the toilet in portacabins. It is a concrete sign of a Government who have given up on communities up and down the country.

For many families, the school is the public service that they interact with most. When parents read about crumbling concrete; when the parent-teacher association has to fundraise for basic repairs and maintenance; and when the local school's rebuilding plans are rejected year after year, they know that the Government have let them down and taken them for granted. Just consider how that makes our young people feel. If their classroom has buckets in various corners; if they spend all day in a coat because the boiler is broken; or, worse, if their school closes altogether, the message that they hear is that they do not matter—that their education, their future, is not worth investing in.

When the announcement was made, parents looked to the Conservative Government for three things: empathy, responsibility and leadership. I am sorry to say that they have provided none of them. A Government with empathy would not put out a social media advert saying that "most schools are unaffected". Instead, they would tell concerned parents that one school with risky RAAC was one too many.

This may be just the tip of the iceberg. Some schools in Twickenham and Richmond are awaiting surveys. Other councils are wading through the guidance and complaining that the DfE has lost the questionnaires they have sent in. Pupils just over the river from my constituency at St Paul's Primary School in Thames

Ditton, at Langney Primary Academy in Eastbourne, or at the Royal College Manchester in Cheadle will now want the Government to give them a concrete timeline on when their at-risk buildings will be repaired.

An Education Secretary who understood collective responsibility would take the flak for her Government's failings, not pass the buck and fish for compliments. A Prime Minister who showed leadership would listen to his officials and invest in our children. Is it "completely and utterly wrong" to blame him for the crisis? Let me ask this: who was Chancellor in 2022, when, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the three-year average spend on education capital was at its lowest since 2004? Who was Chancellor when education officials told the Treasury that it would cost £5 billion to mitigate the most serious risks of building failure, yet signed off only two thirds of that amount? Who was the Chancellor who was told to build more than 200 schools a year but approved only 50? It was the right hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak). These penny-pinching tactics are coming back to bite him, yet even now, the Treasury will not stump up new cash to remove the RAAC; it is putting off repairs to other dilapidated school buildings.

Every crumbling classroom stands as a concrete sign of years of Conservative neglect of our children and our communities. Of course, pupil safety is paramount and unsafe classrooms should be shut, but we should never have got to this point. This crisis was years in the making.

Liberal Democrats know that when we invest in the fabric of our schools, we invest in our children's future. Our nurseries, schools and colleges should have been treated as critical infrastructure, yet too often with this Government, children are an afterthought. Liberal Democrats would have invested in our schools, removing risky RAAC and clearing the backlog of school repairs.

In May, I told the House:

"Neglecting school and college buildings endangers our children and may well contribute to this Government's downfall."—[*Official Report*, 23 May 2023; Vol. 733, c. 249.]

I am sorry to say, on behalf of parents, pupils and school staff, that the chickens are coming home to roost.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I call the shadow Minister, I want to emphasise how important it is that those who contributed to the debate get back in good time for the wind-ups. There are those who are not here, which is discourteous to the shadow Minister.

4.39 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): This debate is incredibly important, as it gets to the heart of the responsibility that we all share to the next generation—a responsibility to give every child the best start in life, and the opportunity to thrive at school and throughout their life, and, above all, a responsibility to keep children safe. The Government are not just failing in that fundamental responsibility; worse, they are hiding—from reality, from scrutiny and from the consequences of their decisions over 13 long years. Those consequences mean that this week, children cannot go to school because their buildings are unsafe. And still the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister—and,

I have to say, hon. Members on the Government Benches—are desperately trying to pass the buck. They are refusing to be honest about the fact that they speak not just for this Government today, but for the Governments in which they have served, and on whose record they stand.

The Secretary of State has been asking for praise today, because she finally published the list of affected schools, but this is about much more than the schools on her list. It is about schools the length and breadth of this country that are not fit for our children to learn in or staff to work in. That is why our motion asks for two things. First, we are asking for the Department for Education submissions to the spending reviews in which, instead of increasing school building budgets, the Prime Minister—then Chancellor—chose to cut them. Secondly, we are asking for the correspondence on those submissions, like that released in *The Observer* last year, in which officials at the Department for Education warned that school buildings are a risk to life.

Alun Cairns: The hon. Lady is making a number of serious allegations. Does she apply those equally to the Welsh Government, considering that they have been in power and in charge of education for 26 years in Wales? I repeat the point I made in my contribution: would Labour Members in the Senedd support a similar motion that would achieve the same effect, if tabled by Conservative colleagues?

Catherine McKinnell: Unlike the Conservative Government in England, the Welsh Government are investing in rebuilding schools, which is why they face a different situation from the one we face. Today we are looking at history and for transparency, not for a geography lesson.

Parents and the wider public deserve to know how and why decisions were taken, such as why the number of schools that the Government are planning to rebuild each year has been cut to just 50. The Prime Minister has been looking for plaudits, but under his leadership, the Treasury almost halved the money going into school building. This week we heard the former permanent secretary say that he was shocked when the number of schools that the Government planned to rebuild each year was not increased to 300, but cut. That is what officials said was needed to keep children safe; not thriving—we are not talking about bells and whistles—but just safe.

The Prime Minister, as Chancellor, said no to the request to rebuild our schools and make them safe, just as he turned down a request to deliver a proper recovery programme for the children recovering from the pandemic. While donating to American colleges, he has condemned children in England to crumbling buildings and, now, another round of learning from home.

Conservative Members have a choice today. They can vote with us to be honest with parents, pupils and staff about the decisions the Prime Minister took and the consequences for our children, or they can stay in their “not me, guv” ranks and vote to keep parents in the dark yet again. The Prime Minister promised to lead a Government of integrity and accountability, so today, at least, they have an opportunity to make that a reality.

My hon. Friends the Members for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott), for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake), for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), for Jarrow (Kate

Osborne), for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western), for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) and for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) all made incredibly powerful speeches about the importance of this issue to the children, parents and school staff in their areas. Many Conservative Members also highlighted the challenge the issue has posed in their constituencies, yet all sought to deflect the blame. That is why this debate is about taking responsibility. The speeches from my hon. Friends set out very clearly why this matters to the parents and in particular the children in our constituencies who are affected by it.

We are, of course, pleased that the Government finally published the list of schools this morning, but are they sure it is accurate? Just today we are hearing reports that schools the Secretary of State told to—if I am allowed to say it—get off their arses have in fact returned their RAAC surveys and, in some cases, have gone ahead and remedied the RAAC themselves in the absence of any support from the Government. Other schools are emerging that are not on the list but have been identified as having RAAC. There is concern, and it explains why the Secretary of State has been so reluctant to release the list. There seems to be a lot of chaos in Government, not only in the lead-up to this situation but in handling it at this stage.

I have no doubt—[*Interruption.*] The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has literally just walked in. I am not sure what his contribution is at this stage, but I will come on to him in a moment. I have no doubt that when the Minister of State stands up, he will, like the Secretary of State, want to talk about Labour’s record on education, so I thought I would get ahead of him. Labour in government reduced class sizes by recruiting thousands of new teachers and introduced teaching assistants to raise standards for all our children. We increased participation in post-16 education and saw record numbers progressing to university. And we had a school rebuilding programme.

Building Schools for the Future set out a pathway to rebuilding or refurbishing every secondary school in England, backed up by the primary capital programme to invest in the maintenance and repair of primary schools across the country. The last Labour Government set out a plan to transform our country’s school estate, leading to improvements in standards and behaviour and making schools a safe place for children to learn, because Labour knew then, as we know now, that children cannot get a first-class education in a second-class school.

It only took the current Levelling Up Secretary six years to admit that he regretted scrapping the Building Schools for the Future programme and cancelling over 700 school building projects, but it seems that the lessons he learned are not being passed on to his colleagues. It will therefore be for the next Labour Government to make our school estate one to be proud of once more and to make sure that every child in every corner of the country can go to an excellent local school.

I expect the Minister will also quote from the James review and tell the House about the surveys of school buildings that his Government have undertaken. When he does, perhaps he could clarify this. On 11 January this year, the Minister responded to a written question

[Catherine McKinnell]

from the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), stating that their surveys are

“visual inspections only, and do not assess the overall structural integrity of a building.”

Two days later, in response to another question from my hon. Friend, he repeated that, saying that the condition data collection is “not a safety survey”. However, less than a month later, on 7 February, he said that the survey provides a “robust evidence base” for targeting capital funding. It would be helpful if the Minister explained how both those statements can be true at the same time, and how a survey can provide a “robust evidence base” if it is not assessing safety or structural integrity. What this looks like to me is yet more chaos and contradiction from the Government.

It is becoming clearer by the day that 13 years of Conservative government have failed our children. For our school estate, they have been 13 years of cut-price sticking-plaster solutions and inefficient repairs, when green rebuilds and long-term plans were required. We have seen ageing buildings, many of which were built decades if not more than a century ago, with unmet repairs, cracked walls, asbestos, buckets placed in classrooms catching leaks and crumbling roofs. The Government’s complacency on this is unforgivable, but it is clear that they are not going to own up voluntarily to the scale of this problem or their failure.

Whether the issue is lockdown parties, speeding tickets, Government contracts or school buildings, this Government are incapable of transparency. That is why the House must force them to be transparent and to be honest with parents about the choices they made to leave the school estate crumbling around our children, because it is parents, children and school staff whose lives could be at risk—those are not my words, but the words of senior officials in the Department for Education. Last year, the Government invited bids from schools for building replacements or repairs. More than 1,000 schools applied, yet the Prime Minister proudly told us that he planned to rebuild just 500 over the next decade.

We are already seeing the impact of these short-sighted decisions on our school estate. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam has told the House that a parent in her constituency was injured when a piece of cladding fell on her. A recent freedom of information request from *Schools Week* found that a teacher was reportedly admitted to hospital after being hit by a falling ceiling tile at a school in Bradford. What could have happened if those events had occurred at a different time or place when there were more children in the classrooms does not bear thinking about.

Until the Government own up to their responsibility, it falls to the House to ensure that children go to schools that are safe, that teachers and staff are not put at risk, and that we are honest with the public about the decisions that have been made. For more than a decade, Conservative Governments have neglected that duty. As my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South said in her opening speech, the defining image of 13 years of Tory government will be children cowering under the steel supports that stop the ceiling falling down. I say to the Government, “Come clean, own up, and support our motion today.”

4.52 pm

The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb): Let me start by welcoming the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) to her new post and congratulating her once again on her—in my view—promotion to that position.

This has been a debate on an important subject, but behind all the understandable concern is one key piece of information that the House and the country need. Until last week, the advice and guidance that the Department for Education issued to schools was that if RAAC was present in a building, structural surveyors should assess it, and that if it was graded as being in a critical condition, the building should be taken out of use. Where RAAC was assessed as non-critical, the advice was to continue monitoring it, but not to take the building out of use. What happened over the summer was that the Department was made aware of three cases—one commercial and two in schools, one of which was outside England—in which RAAC that had been graded as non-critical collapsed or failed. It had become clear that visual assessment alone would not definitively identify a cracked panel that was on the verge of failure.

Given that evidence, I say this to every Member of the House: “How would your decision differ from that of the Secretary of State and Ministers at the Department for Education on the question of whether to change the guidance to require all buildings with critical and non-critical RAAC to be taken out of use? What would your decision have been, given that evidence?”. Professional advice from technical experts on RAAC has evolved over time; indeed, the question of how to manage its risks across all sectors has spanned successive Governments since 1994.

The Department for Education systematically made the sector aware of the latest guidance from technical engineers in 2018, following a sudden roof collapse at a primary school. We published a warning note, with the Local Government Association, that asked all responsible bodies to identify any properties constructed using RAAC and to ensure that RAAC properties were regularly inspected by a structural engineer. In February 2021, we issued a guide on identifying RAAC. Concerned that not all responsible bodies were acting quickly enough, in 2022 we decided to take a more direct approach. We issued a questionnaire to the responsible bodies for all 22,000 schools to ask them to identify whether they had, or suspected they had, RAAC. Responsible bodies have submitted responses to those questionnaires for 95% of schools with blocks built in the target era and we actively chased the remaining responses.

In September 2022, we started a significant programme of technical surveys, with the DfE sending a professional surveyor to assess whether RAAC was present in those schools where the responsible body had responded to the questionnaire saying that there was suspected RAAC. There are more than 22,000 schools and colleges in England, and the vast majority of them are unaffected by RAAC. To date, 52 schools and colleges have put mitigations in place. Of the 156 schools in the list we published today, 104 are providing continued face-to-face teaching for all pupils. A further 20 schools have some pupils learning off-site and 19 have delayed the start of term by a few days to ensure that pupils can start of the term in face-to-face teaching safely on site. Only a very

small number—four—have needed to move to remote education. They include St Leonard's Catholic School in Durham, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy).

Every school and college that is impacted has a dedicated caseworker to help implement a mitigation plan. This will include using other spaces on the school site, in nearby schools or elsewhere in the local area until structural supports or temporary buildings are installed. We have increased the supply of temporary buildings, working with three contractors, and we have accelerated the installation of these. We have the support of leading utility companies to ensure that those temporary classrooms can be connected to the utilities and opened. In the small number of schools with confirmed RAAC that have disruption to face-to-face teaching, this has lasted only a matter of days in the past. We have also set up an operational hotline to ensure that Members of this House and other interested parties can, if appropriate, fast-track issues to caseworkers.

Since 2010, we have invested billions of pounds in school capital. We have created over 1 million more school places and opened over 650 new free schools, helping to drive up academic standards in some of the most disadvantaged parts of the country. We launched the priority school building programme, rebuilding or refurbishing 260 schools between 2012 and 2017. In 2015, we launched the priority school building programme 2, rebuilding or refurbishing 272 schools between 2015 and 2020. In 2020, the Prime Minister, when he was Chancellor, announced the school rebuilding programme to invest in 500 projects over the next decade for new and refurbished school buildings, prioritising buildings in the poorest condition. It is only this Government who have conducted surveys of the whole school estate, starting with the property data survey in 2012. We had the condition data collection in 2017 and now we are partway through the third survey of all our schools. It is only because of this work that we can target capital spending on rebuilding schools in the worst condition.

There have been questions from hon. Members on the details of the funding arrangements to support affected schools and colleges. To reiterate the words of the Chancellor, we will “spend what it takes” to keep children safe. That includes paying for the emergency mitigation work needed to make buildings safe, including alterations and alternative classroom space on school and college sites where necessary. Where schools need additional help with revenue costs, such as transport to other locations, we are actively engaging with every school affected to put appropriate support in place. We will also fund the longer-term refurbishment or rebuilding projects where these are needed to rectify RAAC in the longer term.

The hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) complained about schools closing because of RAAC but, as I have said, only four of the 156 listed schools have actually closed. My hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) is right to say that it is clear this Government are taking a zero-risk approach to the safety of buildings where new evidence emerges.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) and the shadow Education Secretary, the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), both raised the issue of asbestos. All schools have an

asbestos register and, if asbestos needs to be removed to put in place RAAC mitigation works, it will be removed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) correctly challenged the Opposition to say whether they think the Secretary of State has taken the right decision, and they could not answer because they know it is the right decision. He asked important and serious questions about how RAAC was allowed to be used in the first place.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) seemed very cross on behalf of his constituents but, of course, none of the 156 schools on the list we published today is in his constituency or in Liverpool. My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) raised the issue of costs, and we will cover all capital costs and, subject to need, revenue costs. Schools should discuss this with the DfE.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris), in a brilliant speech, was right to quote Philip Collins's article in *The Times* this week, setting out how standards have risen in our schools because of Conservative policies on the curriculum and on phonics since 2010, and because of all the work done by Education Secretaries since 2010, including my right hon. Friends the Members for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) and for Chichester (Gillian Keegan). My hon. Friend the Member for Newbury rightly cited all the new school buildings in her constituency, as we can also see throughout the country.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey), in a passionate speech, was right to criticise the PFI arrangements under Labour's Building Schools for the Future programme, which we are all paying for today. In their brilliant speeches, my hon. Friends the Members for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) and for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) were both right to say that the Secretary of State has taken the right decision in the interest of safety.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes) was right to contrast the swift action by this Government with the approach taken by Wales. That point was also made by the former Secretary of State for Wales, my right hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns). My hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) was prescient, as always on so many things, in raising in this House, on a number of occasions, the issue of RAAC in the NHS. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) spoke about Kingsdown School, and I will raise the three issues she mentioned.

Under Conservative Governments since 2010, despite the challenges of managing the aftermath of the 2007 to 2009 banking crash and the state of the public finances we inherited from the previous Government, despite the huge financial challenges of supporting the economy and household incomes during covid, and despite the energy price hike as a result of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine—despite the massive financial implications of all these challenges—we have created 1 million more school places and invested heavily in improving the quality of the school estate. We are spending record amounts on schools: £59.6 billion next year, the highest on record in cash terms, in real terms and in real terms per pupil. Standards are rising, with 88% of schools judged good or outstanding today, compared with 68% in

[Nick Gibb]

2010. Maths standards are rising, with England excelling in international league tables, and the reading ability of our nine-year-olds is now the fourth best of the 43 countries that test children of the same age.

We put the safety of children and staff above all else. We have proactively sought out RAAC in our schools, more comprehensively than any other jurisdiction. We have monitored the growing evidence on RAAC, and we acted swiftly and with caution for the safety of children and staff at every step. When the evidence changed, we changed our advice to schools. We are supported and funding the repairs and temporary remedies that we need to put in place in the tiny minority of schools that have been affected. That is our approach, and I urge hon. Members to back that caution and concern about the safety of our children and school staff by voting overwhelmingly against this motion tonight.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 175, Noes 309.

Division No. 322]

[5.4 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Dowd, Peter
Abrahams, Debbie	Dyke, Sarah
Ali, Rushanara	Eagle, Dame Angela
Ali, Tahir	Eastwood, Colum
Amesbury, Mike	Edwards, Jonathan
Anderson, Fleur	Efford, Clive
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Elliott, Julie
Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Elmore, Chris
Begum, Apsana	Eshalomi, Florence
Benn, rh Hilary	Esterson, Bill
Betts, Mr Clive	Fletcher, Colleen
Blake, Olivia	Foxcroft, Vicky
Blomfield, Paul	Foy, Mary Kelly
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Furniss, Gill
Brennan, Kevin	Gill, Preet Kaur
Brown, Ms Lyn	Glendon, Mary
Burgon, Richard	Greenwood, Lilian
Byrne, rh Liam	Greenwood, Margaret
Cadbury, Ruth	Griffith, Dame Nia
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Gwynne, Andrew
Carden, Dan	Haigh, Louise
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Hamilton, Fabian
Chamberlain, Wendy	Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Champion, Sarah	Hanna, Claire
Clark, Feryal (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	Hardy, Emma
Cooper, Daisy	Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Cooper, rh Yvette	Harris, Carolyn
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Healey, rh John
Coyle, Neil	Hillier, Dame Meg
Creasy, Stella	Hollern, Kate
Cryer, John	Howarth, rh Sir George
Cummins, Judith	Huq, Dr Rupa
Dalton, Ashley	Hussain, Imran
Davey, rh Ed	Jardine, Christine
David, Wayne	Jarvis, Dan
Davies-Jones, Alex	Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Debbonaire, Thangam	Johnson, Kim
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Jones, Darren
Dixon, Samantha	Jones, Gerald
Dodds, Anneliese	Jones, Sarah
	Kendall, Liz
	Khan, Afzal
	Kinnock, Stephen

Kyle, Peter
 Lake, Ben
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Lloyd, Tony (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Murray, James
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Olney, Sarah
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve

Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Navendu Mishra and
Taiwo Owatemi

NOES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriye, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, rh Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony

Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, rh Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike

French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Garnier, Mark
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hammond, Stephen
 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
 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
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Dame Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Largon, Robert

Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Longhi, Marco
 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
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Mullan, Dr Kieran (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Patel, rh Priti
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John

Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 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
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Wates, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
 Steve Double and
 Ruth Edwards

Question accordingly negated.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

That the draft Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 28 June, be approved.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

MEDICINES

That the draft Human Medicines (Amendment Relating to Original Pack Dispensing) (England and Wales and Scotland) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 29 June, be approved.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

West Midlands Combined Authority

5.18 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I rise to present this petition, which mirrors the “Warwickshire, Let’s not be Run by Brum” e-petition that I launched on my website in July 2023, currently signed by just under 1,000 people. It reflects widespread public concern about the proposals made by the west midlands Mayor Andy Street and the Conservative leader of Warwickshire County Council to annex Warwickshire and to include it under the West Midlands Combined Authority ahead of next May’s west midlands mayoral elections, which would be tantamount to naked gerrymandering. The petitioners therefore request that

“the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that Warwickshire County Council is not absorbed into the West Midlands Combined Authority.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Warwick and Leamington,

Declares that Warwickshire residents do not wish to join the West Midlands Combined Authority; further declares that that any discussions held between the West Midlands Combined Authority and Warwickshire County Council should be held openly and transparently; and that a referendum is held so the public can have their say on any proposed plans.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that Warwickshire County Council is not absorbed into the West Midlands Combined Authority.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002845]

Funding for Local Pharmacies

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents in Bradford South, although I know that this issue is recognised right across the country. I have received 280 letters from constituents on this subject, reflecting the strength of feeling across Bradford, and in particular among those who are served by their local pharmacy in the area of Wyke. The petition reflects concerns across Bradford that the Government have stripped proper funding for pharmacies to act as community access points for NHS support and face-to-face healthcare support. The petitioners therefore request that

“the House of Commons urge the Government to support pharmacies as they seek to recover from the pandemic, ensuring that they can continue to provide a high standard of care to patients within the community.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the issue of the underfunding of local pharmacies is threatening their ability to continue to serve communities and areas such as Bradford South; notes that pharmacies are vital as points of access for face-to-face healthcare advice and NHS support; and further declares that access to pharmacies is vital for preventing excess pressure on GPs and hospitals across the country.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to support pharmacies as they seek to recover from the pandemic, ensuring that they can continue to provide a high standard of care to patients within the community.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002850]

Duty on Shopping: UK Entry Points

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Joy Morrissey.)

5.21 pm

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I rise to speak as the Member of Parliament for Crawley, a constituency that proudly includes Gatwick airport within its boundaries, and as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the future of aviation, for which I declare an interest. It is in those roles that I have been determined to support the aviation, travel and tourism industries as they continue to recover from the covid-19 pandemic, and I call on the Government to introduce duty-free shopping on arrival at airports and international rail and ferry terminals in Great Britain.

Reinstating duty-free shopping for passengers arriving from Europe and significantly increasing inbound personal allowances upon Brexit proved popular, with a 45% increase in sales of duty-free items by UK passengers shopping overseas in our first year outside the European Union. However, British businesses and airports do not benefit from that. Passengers can spend their increased allowances abroad only at their point of departure. The introduction of duty-free on arrival stores at airports, ferry ports and international railway stations would repatriate those sales to Great Britain, crucially ensuring that British businesses are the main beneficiaries of the post-Brexit duty-free system.

I will highlight three main benefits: the effect on the recovery of the travel industry, the impact on British competitiveness, and the importance of choice and the passenger experience. On the first benefit, travel recovery and regional connectivity, I do not need to repeat to the House the full impact of the covid-19 pandemic on the aviation sector. As the sector continues to recover, we know that travel hubs need non-aeronautical revenues such as retail and duty-free. Indeed, as much as half of total airport income can come from those activities. All UK airports and international terminals will benefit from duty-free on arrival stores. The creation of new retail areas at UK airports would trigger significant capital expenditure for building works as infrastructure is adapted to take advantage of this new opportunity, resulting in further economic investment, including creating construction jobs for the duration of those projects. The increase in sales can be reinvested in new routes, improving passenger numbers and attracting more visitors, making London and regional hubs across the UK more competitive with rival cities such as Paris, Milan and Barcelona.

I draw the House's attention to the example of Norway. Being a non-EU nation, Norway introduced duty-free on arrival stores in 2005 and there was an immediate impact on Aberdeen airport. Sales to Norwegian-bound passengers fell by 40%, with the average spend per passenger halving. The resulting growth on commercial revenues in Norway was invested in route development, which allowed it to attract new airlines by lowering charges. Norway now has the lowest aeronautical charges per passenger in the whole of Europe. More passenger growth, more income and more investment—all without the need for the Government to fund support.

The second benefit is the impact on global competitiveness. We know that more than 60 countries have now implemented duty-free on arrival, including

most major travel hubs in Asia, the middle east and Oceania, as well as fellow non-EU countries. If the EU implemented arrival duty-free stores before we did, it would have a detrimental effect on British ports of entry. European Travel Retail Confederation modelling predicts arrivals duty-free gross value added boosts would be some €300 million for Spain, €190 million for Italy and €580 million for France. Such sales would have a devastating impact on UK port departure stores. However, the UK Government could get ahead and legislate for arrivals stores first, future-proofing the sector.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman's argument. My own local airport, Edinburgh airport, would benefit greatly from duty-free arrivals—not least because, as in quite a few international airports, passengers have to go through the shopping area to get out of the airport. Therefore, in some cases there might not even be the need for capital investment. Having experienced this in Australia, it is very tempting when we arrive in a duty-free area to buy duty-free, so there would be a huge incentive for people coming to this country to buy duty-free on arrival and benefit the local economy.

Henry Smith: The hon. Lady is exactly right; I have experienced similar when travelling to Australia or closer countries such as Switzerland. The boost that that gives to those local economies is quite significant.

In this country, however, we need to act quickly. Such a plan for arrivals duty-free is under active consideration by the European Commission as part of the directorate-general for taxation and customs union's review into travel and tourism taxation. Introducing arrivals duty-free is the only way we would be able to level the field.

The third benefit is greater choice and passenger convenience. The modern passenger has come to expect the retail element of the travel experience. Duty-free purchases on arrival will contribute to a more seamless travelling experience. Arrivals shops are a separate market in competition with departure duty-free sales from airports abroad. The lack of arrivals duty-free is placing us at a competitive disadvantage.

Arrivals duty-free is not only convenient, but popular too: polling commissioned in 2022 found 45% of travellers regard carrying duty-free items back to the UK on their flight as an inconvenience. Polling conducted at several UK airports last year found that in many areas, including my own Gatwick airport, two thirds of people would support the Government introducing such stores.

Nevertheless, I am aware that there remain concerns among those on the Treasury Bench, and I am keen to address them. The first concern from His Majesty's Treasury, I suspect, is the revenue implications for the Exchequer. Research from York Aviation predicts that such stores will result in additional sales of £100 million each year. An increased spend of between 20% and 30% per passenger is also anticipated. I therefore ask the Government to again look at the example of Norway, where, as of 2019, duty-free on arrival sales have increased by 108% since the policy's implementation, and are growing consistently at an average rate of more than 10% each year.

In this scenario, the initial loss of excise duties for HM Treasury is quickly offset by other forms of taxation, in addition to new jobs. At Zurich airport, for example,

[Henry Smith]

the introduction of a single arrivals duty-free store meant an additional 50 jobs. For the UK, the increase in income tax and corporation tax is estimated to be an additional £50 million each year for the Exchequer. Even at the lowest levels of predicted sales, the impact on Government revenues is still likely to be only cost-neutral at worst. The policy would also increase sales on duty-paid categories.

The second concern that I suspect the Treasury has is about the impact on the domestic high street. Although I appreciate that concern, we need to be clear that the only competition to arrivals duty-free stores is from overseas departure duty-free stores. The introduction of the policy has the support of many brands that sell in the domestic market both on the high street and in travel retail channels. The size of the inbound duty-free market is less than 2.2% of the domestic market for the same products. Even if the policy were more successful than expected, any impact on the high street would be nominal. Passengers at an airport are drawn from a far wider catchment area than those in town centre stores, for example. To look again at examples from elsewhere, Switzerland and Norway have both had arrivals stores for over a decade, and neither has detected any impact on high street sales.

The third concern that I suspect the Treasury may have is about implementation. Let us be clear: in the model of arrivals duty-free stores proposed by the industry, arrivals stores would be located before customs clearance. That would avoid any additional staffing or resourcing pressures, and could provide a more robust level of control and oversight. Border Force and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs would have the opportunity to observe and audit purchases using existing mechanisms, as they do now, and monitor inbound duty-free allowance limits. As a result of Brexit, only secondary legislation will be needed for implementation, so the change would not be burdensome on the busy schedule and agenda of this House.

Let me reiterate my support for sustainable aviation fuel more broadly, and for the wider aim of the aviation sector reaching jet zero—the commitment that UK domestic aviation will achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2040.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. No. The hon. Gentleman has only just come into the Chamber. This is an Adjournment debate, and he should have been here from the beginning to intervene, as he knows.

Henry Smith: I did not notice my hon. Friend slink in behind me, but I am grateful for his moral support, Madam Deputy Speaker, even though by your order he is unable to vocalise it.

On my support for sustainable aviation, I was pleased to host and address a new industry alliance, Hydrogen in Aviation, just last night here in Parliament. The alliance is designed to help the UK lead innovation in that field. That would, along with duty-free on arrival, better support our sector. Aviation and our ports are

vital for UK trade and employment. We can do this in a cleaner, smarter way, and duty-free arrivals can play an important part for the sector.

In closing, it is clear that the introduction of arrivals duty-free stores would support economic growth and provide a timely boost to the recovery of aviation, travel and tourism from the pandemic. This plan would be funded by industry and would be at worst cost-neutral for the Exchequer. It is a low-risk policy that has already proven successful in some 65 countries around the world. There would likely be no impact on domestic high street sales, due to limited market overlap and differing customer behaviours in duty-free stores. By introducing duty-free stores on arrival, the Government can reaffirm their commitment to supporting the aviation, travel and tourism sectors, and the economic prosperity that they afford by providing employment to so many of my constituents, and to communities across the entire country. The policy is also popular with the electorate, so I hope that the Government will act swiftly to achieve this additional Brexit freedom.

5.35 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Victoria Atkins):

First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) on securing tonight's important debate. He brings so much experience and expertise on this issue to the Chamber, not just through his chairmanship of the APPG for the future of aviation, but as the Member of Parliament for Gatwick. I thank him very much for that. I am conscious that people outside the Chamber may be watching the debate, so let me say that what we are discussing is duty on the sale of alcohol and tobacco, which would ordinarily attract UK excise duty and VAT. My hon. Friend advocates for the removal of that duty and VAT for passengers who have entered Great Britain from outside the UK before they have reached custom-controlled entry points. I will give some background on the Government's duty-free policy, because it is an important part of the overall picture.

In January 2021, the Government extended duty-free sales to EU-bound passengers for the first time in over 20 years, which was a significant boost to airports and international rail terminals in Great Britain. That change meant that passengers travelling from the UK to the EU were able to purchase duty-free goods once they had passed security controls at ports, airports and train stations on international routes. They also became able to purchase duty-free goods onboard international transport routes from Great Britain. As my hon. Friend said, we understand that customers find it convenient to buy their products during the flight, or to order them in advance and pick them up at the end. We are pleased that the change in policy has been a boost for UK travel hubs; indeed, I watch with close interest to ensure that the tax savings brought about by this Conservative Government are passed on to consumers, because that is important. I hope that retailers watching the debate will note the Minister's interest in their doing the right thing and ensuring that those savings are passed on.

When we made those changes in 2021, we said that we were not considering a similar policy for arrivals, for several reasons. First, as my hon. Friend has identified, there were serious concerns about the impact on shops in the UK, whether on the high street or closer to an airport. Duty-free on departure encourages purchases in the UK that might otherwise be made abroad. That

case is less clearcut with regard to allowing customers to buy goods duty-free on arrival; that could create an unfair playing field for the domestic duty-paid retailers working either in the confines of the airport or station or beyond them.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) mentioned her local airport of Edinburgh. I am thinking of arrivals at Heathrow, where once a passenger has gone through customs, they are in the arrivals hall, and there are shops there selling products, as one would expect. I must confess that I have never tried to buy cigarettes or alcohol from those shops, so I know not what prices they would charge, but importantly, because they are on the arrivals side of the barrier, they have to charge duty and VAT on products. There might be only a few feet between those retailers selling products duty-free and others selling the very same products beyond the barrier, on the arrivals side.

Secondly, we would have to consider the need for adequate infrastructure and resourcing for the publicly funded Border Force, so that it could combat fraud, ensure compliance with requirements and enforce any charge at all entry points. In a moment, I will go into some of the duties that Border Force has at airports, but we must remember the enormous responsibility on those officers at travel hubs, and the range of offences and activities that they have to be alert to. As a former Home Office Minister, I would have to be very careful to understand how giving those officers extra responsibilities regarding the sale of duty-free alcohol and tobacco would be of wider benefit to the British public. Businesses would also need to put supporting infrastructure in place, which would be costly to them.

Finally, duty would of course be lost from those sales. We have considered very carefully the York Aviation report. My officials have briefed me on it, and we appreciate the effort that has gone into it, but we consider that the report falls into the error of overstating the size of any additional economic activity that would result from the proposal. We remain to be convinced that this change to VAT and duty policy would lead to a rise in sales of these products that would support the creation of many new jobs across the economy.

Henry Smith: Would Treasury Ministers be willing to meet industry representatives to discuss the concerns that the Minister is expressing about the impact of the policy change? Through such dialogue, we could probably find a solution that would alleviate fears across the board.

Victoria Atkins: I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend and representatives, but I must temper expectations. For a change to be made of this nature, the economic case for the entire UK economy would have to be very strongly made. He will appreciate that I receive many well intentioned suggestions on removing VAT—and other forms of tax, but particularly VAT—from products. Indeed, I think we are up to £50 billion-worth of suggestions since we regained our freedoms on leaving the EU. We have to be very clear as to the economic benefits, but I am always very happy to meet my hon. Friend.

The report also deals with the issue of jobs. Again, we remain to be convinced that, if jobs were to be created, they would be additional to the jobs already in place in the high street that involve selling alcohol and

tobacco with duty and VAT charged, as they are obliged to be charged on the UK high street. I am afraid that we do not accept the report's conclusions.

I will give my hon. Friend a little bit more detail on the broad objectives behind duty-free on arrivals. First, we are very conscious that the duties we charge on alcohol and tobacco serve not just an economic purpose, but the critical public health objective of trying to persuade people to stop smoking, or to smoke far less, and to have a healthy relationship with alcohol. Indeed, my hon. Friend will know of the very sensible changes made to the alcohol duty regime in the Finance Act 2023 to enable products with a higher strength of alcohol to be treated differently from products with a lower alcohol content. That was done because, as I think we all acknowledge, reflecting the strength of alcohol in the duty price is a way, we hope, of helping people to make decisions about their health. Our current duty-free-on-departure policy strikes a balance between those objectives and supporting international travel, but we would have to consider carefully whether duty-free on arrival would maintain that balance.

Secondly, we ask whether displacement would occur, and whether any losses would outweigh any indirect benefits of increased economic activity. Outbound duty-free for EU passengers alone is estimated to cost around £200 million per year, primarily through displacement of duty-paid high street sales to duty-free stores. The Chancellor has been clear that it is vital that we continue to act responsibly with the public finances, so the risk of eroding tax revenues is not one we will take lightly. Finally, there is also a compliance angle. The Government would have to put measures in place to mitigate the risk of increased illicit activity, which would require the diversion of Border Force staff from other crucial areas. That includes the priorities that we rightly set for them, including matters such as illegal immigration, drug smuggling, gun smuggling, terrorism, and other serious offences. That is why we must be very careful before contemplating adding to Border Force's responsibilities, and its vital work of protecting the nation, day in, day out, and ensuring that the law is obeyed by those who travel overseas or into our country.

Of course we keep this policy under review. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss it further, but we would need strong evidence to assure us that high-street duty-paid businesses would not be disadvantaged by a policy of duty-free on arrivals before we even considered any such changes. To reassure my hon. Friend, I asked my officials to pick up on the point that he raised about the EU contemplating changes to the system, and as far as we know, we do not believe that the EU is considering that. Of course, we will ensure that that information is up to date. I am told that as recently as 2021, the EU Parliament said that it was not considering that, but I appreciate that international politics change.

I reiterate the support that the Government have committed to the aviation industry—indeed, often at the behest of my hon. Friend during the pandemic. In May last year, we published “Flightpath to the future”, a strategic framework for the sector to build back better. Through it, we aim to make UK aviation cleaner, greener and more competitive than ever before. The framework explores key issues, including workforce and skills, connectivity, global impact, innovation and decarbonisation. I note with interest those parts of my

[Victoria Atkins]

hon. Friend's speech concerning different types of fuel for the airline industry. That is the sort of work that we wish to help the aviation industry with and, more particularly, to develop in the UK as far as possible.

In conclusion, I thank my hon. Friend for his speech. I reiterate that we have considered this matter carefully, but we must prioritise our responsibilities for the public

finances. That is why we do not feel able at this point to agree to the suggestion, but I am happy to keep the issue under review, and to meet him to discuss it further.

Question put and agreed to.

5.48 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 6 September 2023

[DAME ANGELA EAGLE *in the Chair*]

Financial Education in Schools

9.30 am

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered financial education in schools.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Angela. Tip O'Neill was famously linked to the phrase "all politics is local", but I can go one step further and say that this politics is personal, because I grew up with no financial education at all. I was given no education or instruction on how savings work or about interest rates. I was given no education about investment or what an individual savings account was—I had no idea. I did not know what pensions were; I had heard of them, obviously, but I had never been instructed on how they work, how to apply for one, what the options are, whether I should have a workplace pension, what a final salary pension is, what a defined-contribution pension is or what the differences between them might be—I had no idea.

I had no idea what mortgages were. I had heard of them, obviously, and I knew that people had them, but I did not know how to apply for them, the differences between an interest-only mortgage and a repayment mortgage, or what an endowment mortgage was—I had no idea. I had no idea about debt and debt management; I knew that I spent my money too quickly, but I did not know anything about debt management. If I got to a stage where I was in financial stress, as many people do during their lives, I had no training at all on how to manage that effectively.

I have children now—a 20-year-old who is just going off to university, a 17-year-old, and a 14-year-old. During the recess, I asked them whether they had received any financial education or training. Getting on for 40 years since my defective education, they have not received any education about financial matters at all, yet we know that that is a crucial part of our lives. A huge amount of research has been done by academics and the financial sector on how important financial training is for people's ability to lead normal, high-quality, independent lives. I will go through a little of that research to give Members a flavour of it.

Cambridge University and the Money Advice Service did some work in 2013 in which they established that most money habits are embedded by the age of seven. They found that it was difficult to reverse those early-learned approaches later in life. If somebody does not have them by the age of seven, when they are at primary school, they are already on the back foot.

This year, Santander surveyed a large sample of adults in the UK, and 70% reported that better financial education would have improved their ability to manage their finances during the cost of living crisis. This is a real and present issue. Some 68% of adults think that financial education should be part of the primary school curriculum, so it has broad support from the general population. This is a real problem. I am not alone and

I was not unique. I am the general public; I have not received financial education. That has a huge effect on people's lives right now.

Back in 2021, GoHenry, Censuswide and Development Economics demonstrated at the very least a correlation between the financial education someone receives as a child and their later earning capability. Some 46% of those earning less than £15,000 had received financial education; among those earning between £55,000 and £65,000 a year, 77% had received financial education. It has also been demonstrated that if somebody receives financial education as a child, they save more into their pension pot. On average, people who receive financial education as a child save 44% more each month into their pension than those who did not. That is a startling statistic, and it is not just pensions, but savings more generally: of those who received financial education, more than 50% had saved more than £5,000 for a rainy day; of those with no financial education, only a third had saved that much.

I am sure Members are asking themselves whether that is correlation or causation. If it is causation the debate should finish now because the case has been made overwhelmingly for effective financial education in the school curriculum, but let us consider whether it is correlation. What we are really saying is that there is a middle-class secret to financial education and that those who receive such education at home get a huge leg-up throughout the rest of their lives. Even if it is correlation, it is the job of state education, universally applied, to overcome the deficit and level up so that we can close the middle-class leg-up and bring everyone up to the same standard.

I accept that the formal education system is not about proselytising—it is perhaps not appropriate for a teacher to say, "You must have a pension"—but it is about providing knowledge and information so that students can go on to make good decisions themselves. It is not the role of a teacher to say, "You have to do it." I accept that. But where the outcome of a good decision is so profound both for the individual and for society it begs the question: how much of that knowledge should the education system focus on providing? A good decision in this area has a huge impact on society.

Let us look at the economy. In 2022, the pension wealth of this country was £5.4 trillion—in private pensions, not state pensions. Some 42% of all household wealth is contained in the pension system, 69% of which is invested in UK assets. If we made a small change in the amount of money going through the pension system, that would have an enormous impact on the level of productive investment in the United Kingdom economy.

Then we have the impact on mental health. We know that 11.5 million Britons have less than £100 in savings and that financial stress has a huge impact on mental health. I have had periods when I have been very worried about money. The worry is so profound that you cannot think of anything else. It dominates your life. We know that treatment for an individual mental health episode costs the state between £600 and £800.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on what would at any time in our recent history have been a timely debate. On the point about those 11.5 million people, most of

[Mr Gregory Campbell]

them in the lower socioeconomic groups, does he agree that it is all the more important that teachers and those involved at the outset of people's careers try to inculcate in younger people the need for and benefit of saving even small amounts initially, which build up to a long-term benefit in later years?

Jerome Mayhew: You are absolutely right. I will come on to the benefits of compound interest, which is part of the answer.

Dame Angela Eagle (in the Chair): Order. I do not want to intervene too much, but if you say "you", you are referring to me. As I am sure we all we know, he is "the hon. Gentleman".

Jerome Mayhew: Of course he is. I am sorry for that slip.

Barclays, in its 2014 research, found that 17.5 million hours of productive work was lost because of financial stress. It came up with the figure of £120 billion of value lost to the economy because of financial stress in that year.

Then there is the impact on the individual. Last year, Standard Life did some research on the impact of compound interest on pensions. It created a worked example showing that if a 27-year-old got a relatively modest entry-level job paying £23,000 a year and contributed the minimum to their pension—3%—and their employer contributed the minimum that they could, which is 5%, they would, at the retirement age of 68, have a pension pot of £312,266, a very considerable sum to support them in their later years. However, if that person started saving into their pension just five years earlier, aged 22, their pot would be £424,618 at the age of 68. That is £112,000 bigger—an increase of 36%. The difference is profound not just for the person's chances in later life, but for the state, because there are knock-on consequences for the cost of social care as we age as a society.

I come back to the point that I recognise that it is not the job of the state to proselytise or the job of educational establishments to tell young people that they have to have a pension, for example, but where the impact of failing to give people really good information on which they can take their own decisions is so profound, for the individual, for the economy and for society as a whole, surely there is a level of focus that the state should provide in giving detailed information repeatedly to young people during the educational process. The need is enormous and, in my submission, we do not go nearly far enough.

The answer, one would think, is that young people should be given financial education as part of the curriculum. "Job done," we thought back in 2014 when the coalition Government did exactly that. For secondary education in England, it was made a statutory part of the curriculum. The devolved nations go further: they have it as part of the primary as well as the secondary curriculum. Yet the all-party parliamentary group on financial education for young people, which I am lucky enough to chair, undertook some research and reported earlier this year that, despite the legal requirement for financial education to be part of the curriculum, 56% of teachers in England did not know that it was part of the

curriculum. That begs the question: how were they teaching it if they did not even know that it was part of the curriculum?

The Money and Pensions Service looked at the same issue but from the other end of the telescope. It asked children, "Do you remember ever having received any financial education?" We can forgive them a bit of amnesia, but only 38% of children recalled any. That means that 62% had no recollection of ever having received any financial education at all.

What has gone wrong? Why are we in this state despite the fact that financial education is part of the national curriculum? The first answer is that it is very easy to ignore. We know that there is a lack of awareness, because the researchers told us that the majority of teachers are not aware that financial education is part of the curriculum and they are meant to be teaching it. We know that it is not inspected by Ofsted. We know that it is something that is added in, perhaps as an afterthought, and not part of the core curriculum. There is an easy solution to that, and one of my requests today is that the Department for Education lead, or at the very least support, a determined campaign to raise awareness among educational establishments of the importance of financial education and the fact that it is indeed a statutory part of the national curriculum.

The second reason why financial education has fallen down is that teaching it is hard. Many teachers, just like me, did not receive any financial education themselves, and the survey evidence supports the fact that they do not feel confident in teaching a subject about which they know so little: 55% of teachers find it challenging. They went into further detail and said that there are time pressures and a lack of training—again, it is about their own financial confidence—and, of course, there are many, many competing priorities in the education system. We need to provide teachers with improved access to the training they need. Perhaps there is a role for teacher training colleges. Teachers are coming into the profession with no focus on financial education at all and a lack of confidence in their own abilities in this area. Could teacher training colleges have a focus on financial education as part of the curriculum?

There is a lack of time in schools. Can we integrate the teaching of financial education better into the other subjects that are already part of the curriculum, as part of applied learning? Again, I know that it is not the role of the Department for Education to dictate lesson plans to the 22,000-odd schools in this country, but it is the Department's role to facilitate.

Using financial topics as the context of learning can increase engagement with mathematics. That is not my assertion; research has demonstrated it. In 2019, the OECD undertook a pilot scheme and found that where this subject was integrated, students' performance on exam questions increased by 20%. That is very significant. Of the teachers who participated in the pilot, 81% said that it improved pupils' understanding of financial matters, which we would expect, but about 50% said that their students demonstrated improved attitudes to maths as well. That is quite startling. It improves their ability to answer questions, and it improves their approach to the harder core subject of mathematics. Does the Minister agree with that analysis, and if so, what work is being done to develop this approach more widely within the maths curriculum?

Another piece of feedback, perhaps predictably, was that there is a lack of resources. There are loads of training aids out there. Every established and aspiring bank and financial institution is desperate for their environmental, social and governance departments to provide financial education to young people. Martin Lewis produced a textbook four or five years ago, which I know the Minister was involved in helping to create—more power to your elbow.

Dame Angela Eagle (in the Chair): My elbow?

Jerome Mayhew: His elbow—I am so sorry. I am normally quite good at this!

I recognise that the textbook needs to be updated, but an improved textbook from Martin Lewis or the wider financial services sector could be taught for 30 minutes every fortnight for a couple of years during secondary education. Is that the sort of thing that the Minister and his Department could support? If so, what form would that support take?

One alternative to supporting the many multi-academy trusts out there, including in my constituency, with their internal teaching of financial education is to facilitate access for external financial education trainers to come into schools. Many of them are very keen to do so. Could we allow or even require schools that do not teach financial education internally to give access to accredited financial education training providers to do the job for them?

Let us bring that all together: we have learned that habits form early—by the age of seven. Should we not have financial education as part of the primary curriculum? Should we not learn from the good examples of what goes on in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, where financial literacy is measurably higher than in England? It is not by much, but it is measurably higher, and perhaps that is because they have financial education as part of the curriculum in primary schools. Should we not follow them?

Will the Minister actively support a campaign to increase awareness of financial education as part of the national curriculum for secondary education in England? Will he support the development of improved teaching assets, either within cross-departmental curricula at the moment, or through increased access for external providers? Will he encourage, perhaps in the first instance, voluntary access to external education providers? If that does not go far enough, will he mandate access if schools are not providing financial education themselves, as they are statutorily required to do?

I started this speech saying that politics is personal, and I believe that this is one of those small areas where a tiny change, relatively speaking, could make a profound difference to the lives of the people and economy of this country. We spend so much time here dealing with fluff—the latest 15-minute scandal, the eye-catching initiative. There are relatively few small, but very significant, tweaks that we can make to policy in this country that could have such a profound effect as tweaking the provision of effective financial education for young people. I know this is not an easy win, but it is an achievable win, and I encourage the Minister to grasp it.

Dame Angela Eagle (in the Chair): I intend to call the Front Benchers from 10.30 am. If hon. Members who are not on the Front Benches bear that in mind, there will not be a need for a time limit.

9.52 am

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) securing a very important debate and on his compelling speech; he has made some brilliant arguments, which I will try not to repeat too often.

I used to be a secondary school science teacher, and I distinctly remember that one summer, when I had bottom-set year 10 for biology, only half the pupils turned up to the lesson. I remember saying to those who had arrived, “Where’s everybody else? We’ve got an important lesson on photosynthesis today,” and they said something like, “Oh Miss, FIFA 2010 came out last night. They’ve been up all night playing it, so they’re not coming into school today.” So I said, “But this lesson is really important. You’re not going to pass your GCSE. It’s too complex to repeat it or to catch up at another time, so we’ll do something else.” Then one of them said, “But Miss, we don’t need GCSEs. I’m just going to work in McDonald’s.”

So I thought, what a great opportunity to prove that even if someone does work in McDonald’s full time, they are probably not going to be able to achieve the standard of living they want. So instead of learning about photosynthesis, we spent the lesson creating a spreadsheet on how much someone might earn if they worked at McDonald’s for 48 hours a week. We looked at what their rent costs might be, what their energy bill might be, how much they might spend on food, and how much it would cost for them to have the lifestyle they wanted—to be able to buy the computer games they wanted, and clothes to go out in. By the end of the lesson, they had realised that a job at McDonald’s would not fund the lifestyle they wanted.

Now, there is nothing wrong with a job at McDonald’s, but it is really important for young people to understand the link between working hard at school, getting qualifications and leading the lifestyle they want to lead. I will never forget that they were far more engaged in that lesson than in any other lesson I taught them—probably because they were not learning about photosynthesis, but also because the subject had such a practical impact on their lives and enabled them to see how the world works. I am convinced that financial education at school is important for children, and particularly for those who do not feel that the big careers, opportunities and qualifications are for them.

As my hon. Friend put it so eloquently, money management is such an important life skill, and there is a clear link between ending up in financial difficulty and not having good money management skills. The Centre for Social Justice, which has done some excellent work on the issue, found that 14 million people who experience financial difficulty said that that was partly because of poor money management, and young people are very much over-represented in that group.

In many ways, it is not surprising that young people lack confidence, knowledge and experience in managing money. A lot has changed over recent generations that perhaps makes young people today less confident than previous generations. First, we live in a cashless world. In previous generations, children could literally watch the money coming in and out of the home. They would have seen cash in a tin on the table or in their mum’s purse. They could touch and feel their parent’s wages as

[*Miriam Cates*]

they brought them home from work. They would physically see the money supply depleting during the course of the week, and watch their parents pay the rent, pay the gas meter and put actual coins in a saving pot.

As my hon. Friend told colleagues, the Money and Pensions Service found that money habits and behaviours are generally formed in children by the age of seven and stay with them for life, but many seven-year-olds today have no understanding of where money comes from or how parents make decisions about what is spent, because that is all done virtually. There are massive advantages to that, of course. There are some brilliant money apps that help people to save and plan, and there are some great ones for children too; we use nimbl in my house, and as long as I remember to top it up before pocket money day, everybody is happy. The point is that young children do not see the money, so they are not involved in budgeting unless we explicitly include them in money handling. Otherwise, they miss an early opportunity to see how money works.

The second reason why young people lack confidence is that they enter the labour market so much later than children in previous generations. Many people my grandparents' age started work at 15. They went out, learned a trade and brought in a wage. They had no choice but to learn how to use their wage wisely, so they had early experience of the importance of careful money management, while still having the back-up of parents. Now, with compulsory full-time education until 18 and half of young people then going into full-time higher education, today's young people just do not have the opportunity to earn a wage and learn financial responsibility until five or sometimes even 10 years later than children in former generations. Some young people go through their entire adolescence, and into adulthood, with very little practical opportunity to learn. Again, of course, there are significant advantages to more time in formal education, but we need to be honest about the disadvantages too: the lack of real-world experience and responsibility and the lack of confidence, and the fact that those can lead to poor decision making later in life if they are not rectified.

The third reason for children and young people having lower confidence than children in previous generations, which is linked to being dependent on parents much longer, is that parenting has changed. Parents find it much harder to say no to children than in previous generations; that is just a culture change that has developed. We bail out our children far more and are reluctant to let them fail, so they miss out on the opportunity to learn important life lessons about taking responsibility and consequences earlier on in their lives. Research by the American psychologist Jonathan Haidt reveals that, in western culture, today's 18-year-olds have the life experience of the 15-year-olds of generations ago, largely because of the way that society and parents over-protect them, including financially. As parents, we have to ask ourselves: what is the exit plan? We cannot expect children to go from handouts to careful money management and understanding pensions and interest rates on the day they leave school or university; there needs to be a gradual and deliberate passing over of risk and responsibility.

The final reason for poor money management skills in the younger generation is debt. Debt and credit have become an accepted part of household finances in a way that they were not before. In the 1980s, household debt accounted for about 30% of GDP; now it is well over 80%. Of course, the boom in property prices has added significant debt to household budgets, but with the availability of credit cards and the lack of stigma about debt, it is hard for children to learn the true consequences of not managing money properly—until it is too late. For young people today, the inevitability of student debt means that a huge proportion start their adult lives in debt—a debt that many never repay. It is then difficult for young people to be hopeful about their financial situation. When they know they are in the red, how do they resist taking on more debt? How do they resist one more latte, when they know they will never be able to afford a house, and when there is no possibility of paying off their student loan for an awfully long time? Starting adult life in debt, which is now prevalent, is the worst possible foundation for a sound financial life. It also misleads young people, because other debts are not like that. If they take on a mortgage or take out a car loan, they have to pay it back regardless of their income and it will not be cancelled when they retire.

What do we need to do? Let us leave the issue of student loans for another day. As with all teaching of skills and values, education starts at home, and it is primarily the role of parents to show children how to manage money. We need to think collectively as parents about how we do that in a digital age. I am sure it is possible but it needs to be deliberate.

Board games are a brilliant way to learn, although Monopoly probably puts younger children off capitalism for life. Imagination Gaming, a brilliant group in my constituency, goes into schools and does board games with children. That teach them not just maths, numeracy and financial ability but collaborative and social skills. So board games are really helpful.

However, there is an important role for schools, as part of their duty to prepare people for adult life, and also to break the cycle in families where there is not sound financial management, so that that skill can then be passed on. I agree that adding the topic to the curriculum in 2014 was a good start but, as my hon. Friend said, it is not being delivered. Citizenship is often not taught by experts and is not examined. It is understandable, given the pressure schools are under, that it is not a top priority. So my suggestion, which is similar to my hon. Friend's, would be to put it on the maths curriculum, each and every year, from foundation stage all the way to school leaving. If we start with simple budget calculations, by their mid-teens pupils can have an understanding of mortgages, interest, shares, bonds and pensions.

Money is all about maths and mental arithmetic, and children love handling money. As we have heard, and as I have experienced, children are very engaged when the lesson is important to their future lives. If we embed financial education in a core and examined subject in the curriculum, it will be taught. I appreciate that many teachers might need upskilling and their confidence boosting, but for many children it could make the difference between a confident, successful life and one of debt and misery.

We should also explore ways that schools can offer more practical experience, such as through young enterprise clubs or having an internal market for tuck shops and other such things. In my hon. Friend's briefing, I read about the brilliant example of Queensmead Primary Academy in Leicester, which created an entire school market for its year 6 pupils.

We absolutely must see financial education as a core subject in schools and the home. Then we will be giving children the secure, firm foundation they need for a life, hopefully, of financial confidence and security.

10.2 am

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Angela. I congratulate the hon. Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) on securing this important debate. I support his calls for greater awareness and more ways to embed financial education in our school curriculums and for the resources to help deliver that. He laid out a strong case in terms of the impact on young people's lives.

I, too, had no financial education at school. Two parts in my life were instructive. The first was when I opened my first bank account as a child. I remember the Midland bank and the sports bag I was given. Maybe I am old-fashioned, but that was a physical thing, with a pencil case, clipboard and folder in it, and it was symbolic to me of growing up. With that, come new conversations.

The second involved my father, an engineer who became a small businessman. We grew up above our shop, so we had a sense of the transactions within it. My father went on to become an independent financial adviser. He worked from home, and hearing conversations about personal equity plans and ISAs in the home environment does create an awareness of those things. The hon. Member is right, and those of us who have worked cross-party on some of these issues recognise, that that awareness of and contact with such discussions and debates is extremely important from a young age.

The debate comes in the midst of a cost of living crisis, where people are having to consider more than ever their budgeting skills, their use of credit and debt and their savings. In the 2022-23 young persons' money index, 70% of young people said they were more anxious about money and finances due to the cost of living crisis. That rose to 83% for 17 to 18-year-olds. That is hugely instructive. Alongside the conversations about how much to save at the age of 18—every pound saved at the age of 18 is going to have a much bigger impact on a pension than one saved in later years—we also have to recognise that young people are struggling so much to make ends meet for themselves and their families that some of these conversations can be lost. We have to make sure that we embed skills for life in our education and have policies that make sure people can save from an earlier age.

Helping to build an understanding of financial matters, advice and support, and resilience is exactly what financial education teaches. It is a tool of financial inclusion. I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, where I have recorded that I am a commissioner on the Financial Inclusion Commission. We know that,

without vital early education, young people are likely to struggle to achieve financial literacy as part of their life skills.

The hon. Member for Broadland referenced the University of Cambridge research, which shows that children establish attitudes to money by the age of seven and behaviours towards money by the age of 14. Even if there is financial education in schools, those attitudes are increasingly important for understanding how much young people will take it on board and choose to engage with it. Headteachers tell me that young people are making choices about the value of their education at a much younger age—even from 11 or 12. We have to think about that when looking at primary schools, and I will reference primary schools in my constituency.

It is important to see the impact of apps such as GoHenry, which my nephew, Karan, uses. I am still a bit old-fashioned—I like to hold physical things. It is, however, impactful and important to have new ways in which young people are thinking about their finances. The Money and Pensions Service has set a national goal to see 2 million more children and young people getting a meaningful financial education by 2030. I would like to see that goal accelerated.

Financial education is hugely significant because it is also part of the social mobility puzzle. The Centre for Financial Capability has found that children with low financial literacy scores tend to come from poorer areas, but education can see savings rise significantly. We have made progress, but I would argue that it is not enough. It is important that we find new ways to tackle the challenges to effective delivery of financial education.

Although financial education now has a limited statutory status in secondary schools, a survey of teachers for the all-party parliamentary group on financial education for young people—as the hon. Member for Broadland will know—found that two fifths or so of teachers are unaware of their statutory duty to deliver financial education. Among those who are currently not delivering financial education in schools, training, time and funding were identified as key barriers.

I want to thank some of the providers and campaigners for change, such as Quentin Nason of City Pay It Forward, which partners state schools with finance and business professionals to help make connections for financial education and show what it can mean in terms of the professions that young people might choose later in life. However, charities and the private sector should not be picking up the pieces as a result of Government neglect, and nor should they be addressing the difficulty of implementing financial education for our schools and teachers. There needs to be a bigger plan. Some of the issues raised by other experts have included the experience of teaching in schools being variable; resources being fragmented; teachers not having confidence; and schools still being stuck in covid recovery, which is impacting what they see as extras to the curriculum.

I will share a few bits of feedback that I have had from schools in my constituency. A good example comes from Isleworth & Syon School, which is just outside my constituency, but a lot of my young people will be going there. There is a positive story there about formal, structured units of learning on financial literacy in year 10. Every student receives lessons over eight weeks in year 10, covering topics such as wages, tax, budgeting,

[Seema Malhotra]

debt and borrowing, and ethical consumerism. Sixth-form students receive additional lessons on budgeting before they head off to university or apprenticeships. The importance of the integrating financial education within the wider curriculum is also recognised, including in weekly maths lessons, where it can have an impact, and within economics and business lessons.

Other headteachers, however, have said that although that is important, it does not cover everybody, and we need to have a broader and more consistent view for pupils across our education system. One school told me about the positive impact of Martin Lewis's donation of class textbooks to every state secondary school about four years ago. They are still being used, because they provide invaluable guidance both for students and for personal, social, health and economic education teachers. I pay tribute to Martin Lewis for his efforts in this regard.

When I asked schools about the impact of financial education on pupils, the response was very interesting. The feedback was that pupils really liked to learn about financial topics; teachers say they know that because the pupils asked many more questions and gave really good feedback at the end of the sessions. However, schools also recognise that it takes highly skilled teachers to teach these topics well, and they struggle to access and afford those teachers.

I was also very interested to hear from Cranford Community College and Logic Studio School in my constituency. Logic Studio School runs an investment club and wants to see all of its pupils becoming financially literate. It says that financial literacy is a non-negotiable skill that we must all acquire, which it believes can be achieved only by making financial literacy a focus in education. It talks about partnerships with charities such as MyBnk and with Quilter asset management to give students a stronger background—but, again, that is piecemeal and based on whatever it can manage within the constraints of the wider school context.

Primary schools are also vital. Southville Primary School shared with me details of how, within its PSHE teaching, it encourages children to explore money and shopping, including where people get their money from and different sources of income. It has also participated in Young Enterprise Week, whereby groups of year 6 students are given a small budget and have to invest it in developing a product or service. I pay tribute to Young Enterprise in its 60th anniversary year. The all-party parliamentary group on entrepreneurship, which I chair, launched a very important report with Young Enterprise on applied learning, with recommendations that I hope the Government will continue to assess.

Financial education must be considered in the context of broader challenges that we cannot ignore. When we talk about the quality of teaching, we must recognise that teacher vacancies have more than doubled under this Government. There are more than 2,000 temporarily filled posts a year, teacher recruitment targets have been missed again and more teachers are leaving our classrooms than entering them. Earlier this summer, teachers in Hounslow told me that there were about 1,100 vacancies for teachers within a 10-mile radius.

It is not just about recruiting teachers. The lack of retention of teachers is also causing huge instability when it comes to important learning in our schools.

That is why what Labour has outlined, including using the money from ending private schools' tax breaks to support recruitment in our schools to plug the skills gaps, is really important for how we deliver education. That has to be part of the context in which the Minister responds.

I am also very proud that Labour has announced that it would urgently commission a full expert-led review of curriculum and assessment, to ensure that every child has a broad curriculum. Under Labour, young people will learn practical life skills of the kind that the hon. Member for Broadland outlined, such as pension planning, understanding credit scores, applying for a mortgage and understanding employment and rental contracts.

Financial literacy is more important than ever. It is not just about numbers; it is about life skills, security and future opportunities. It is also about us, as policymakers, being ambitious for our young people and their future, and about recognising that financial education is a key part of how we close the prosperity gap rather than increasing inequality for future generations. It is vital that we equip our young people, such as those in Feltham and Heston, with the financial education that will stay with them for life.

10.14 am

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra). I extend my gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) for securing this really important debate. I am grateful to him for the opportunity to talk about financial education. I echo so much of what he said; I have scribbled some of it down and crossed out some of my notes, because I do not want to spend a lot of time repeating the points that he made so well.

I think everybody here wants to ensure that children leave school with the skills and knowledge that will equip them for their adult lives. However, I am afraid that too often it can seem that some of the most obvious life skills are not being given sufficient prominence, and in some cases are being completely overlooked, during young people's time in schools. The most obvious is learning about basic finances. By that, I mean not just personal finances, but macrofinance—I will talk a little more about that—and the finance of business.

I am glad to add my support to the comments of the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston about Young Enterprise, which I was fortunate to be part of when I was at school. The more I look back on it, the more I think it was incredibly instructive in helping me to go on to be involved in business. I did not realise at the time the level of applied learning involved in the programme: it was hidden in an arts and crafts lesson, where we were encouraged to make candles. I may be the least creative, arts-and-crafty person hon. Members will ever meet—I managed to spill more of the wax I melted on the floor than into the moulds. Yet on the back of that, we were encouraged to come together and form a small business to sell some candles we had created at the school's Christmas market. The programme had us forming a little company that could issue some shares and distribute the profits as and when we had managed to sell all our candles.

In the run-up to the Christmas holidays, I remember seeing rows and rows of candles. It dawned on me that we would have quite a lot of stock left over if the parents I hoped would turn up did not like the products we were creating. At that point, we were hit by the worst snow the country had faced for a decade, I think, and the lights went out. The headteacher approached the little Young Enterprise company we had set up and offered to buy every single candle we had made. That was when I learned how to negotiate with the education sector—I am happy to give the Minister some advice if he needs it at any point—and that when you have something that everybody else wants but there is a limited supply, you can control the price. We got double the amount that we had expected to make on those candles. Every classroom had one—indeed, every teacher had a candle issued as part of their Christmas holiday gift so that when the lights were out at home, they could light the candle and have a little bit of light from our Young Enterprise company. We learned a huge amount. Looking back, the school's work on applied learning was incredibly creatively done.

I talk today to young people in schools about how business is conducted and how they can use their ideas to generate wealth, but there is a lack of understanding in too many of our schools. Too often, unfortunately, I meet constituents who have fallen into the spiral of debt and are often going to loan sharks and illegal moneylenders to try to get themselves out of very difficult situations. As my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland mentioned earlier, it is not just about the constant nagging of trying to pay off those debts, but about the impact that that has on mental health. We have a responsibility to increase financial literacy in our schools.

On Monday, before I came here, I met Angela Fishwick, the chief executive of the credit union in Warrington. She talked to me about some of the excellent work that she is doing in schools, helping at a primary level to encourage children to save. I remember signing up for my Griffin savers account with Midland bank, like the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston, and being given a bag and a clipboard. I also remember being an investor in NatWest, where I was given a piggybank to put money into. Saving money was a physical job. The more money I saved, the more piggybanks I got. I still have them at home, and my son, who is 15, looks at them and thinks, "What do you put in there?", because we do not have money in the same way now.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) mentioned, the way we transact has changed. Everything is done through digital transactions and the ability to save physical cash has gone. However, the Unify credit union is still enabling that in schools. The ability to put a pound into an account at a very early age and see it grow is incredibly important. I was pleased to hear about the work Angela Fishwick is doing in schools, delving into some of the most basic elements of financial literacy in primary schools to encourage children to save early. Talking to her reinforced to me the important role finances play in every part of our lives, whether that is paying taxes, opening a bank account, taking out a mortgage or even just budgeting for the weekly shop. It really does affect everyone.

Financial education is not just about personal financial education; it is also about macroeconomics. I try to visit a different school in my constituency every week and

talk to students about the topics that they would like to cover more of in lessons. Students in the early years of secondary school in particular often talk about the importance of financial education—they do not call it financial education, but they talk about those issues.

Recently, in an English lesson, students at the high school in Appleton wrote to me as their MP about changes they wanted to see in their school. A couple of the boys wanted more goalposts, more footballs and better facilities. I took the opportunity to meet them, and we talked about the cost of all those things. They wanted me to give them the money—because I am the MP, and I have lots of money available to me—so they could buy new equipment.

We talked about the taxation system and where money comes from to fund the services in their town that they enjoy and benefit from. It was fascinating to see the level of ignorance about where public funding comes from. I remember saying to them, "The Government have no money. The only money the Government have is our money, and the only way they generate money is by taxes. When you go to work, you're going to contribute your taxes. The more you earn, the more you're going to contribute." I could see their faces changing very quickly. The idea of paying into this system was not something that they were aware of.

My hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge mentioned that so many young people today do not go to work before the age of 18. I started in a shop when I was 16, and I remember receiving my payslip very early on and seeing that tax had been taken out of it. At the time, tax thresholds were very low and people did not have to earn very much—in fact, I think I was on an emergency tax code from day one. A big chunk of what I earned got taken away from me, and that brought home to me very early our impact and how we contribute to society. If we want to see benefits in our community, we have to contribute to it.

It is not just about personal contributions; it is about community contributions as well. Young people do not see that in the same way, because the tax thresholds that the Conservative Government have lifted to £12,000 mean that the majority of young people who are earning today will pay absolutely no tax until they get past university education. Understanding the tax system would have been an important and practical thing for many young people, but that has changed—it has gone.

I want to conclude by asking the Minister a couple of questions. It is interesting to see the lack of understanding about financial education in schools, but I want to know what support and training is on offer to teachers, who are instrumental in helping. What partnerships is he encouraging with business and organisations such as Young Enterprise to help to skill teachers, many of whom have spent their entire working lives in the education system, do not have a background in business and cannot talk with authority about the issues that affect business? Does he agree that what we have classed as macroeconomics—the taxation system and the way we fund services—should be taught to everybody as they go through school, not just to those who study economics at A-level? I remember doing A-level economics and spending a lot of time talking about the tax system. If students do not study economics, they do not get any education in it at all. For me, it is a matter not just of financial education, but of understanding our democracy and how we all contribute to society.

[Andy Carter]

I will not take up too much more time; I am keen to hear what other Members have to say. Ultimately, we could make a huge difference to young people's lives by championing the issue, which is undoubtedly something that Members of all parties can support.

10.26 am

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Angela.

I am delighted to be here this morning. I declare an interest as a vice-chair, since 2015, of the all-party parliamentary group on financial education for young people. I sometimes feel a bit of a fraud when I talk about financial education and financial matters. I was married for 47 years to a senior tax manager in a firm of international accountants and we were terrible at handling money. That was very much down to my late husband's philosophy, which was, "Don't worry about money. It only matters when somebody owes you and you're not getting it." I can now say this in public because, as many Members will know, my husband died five years ago.

I grew up in a poor family, and I identify with the point that the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) made about jars. That was how my mammy managed money. It is not how my children manage money, and it is not how I do it now.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew), the chair of the APPG, on his good work and on getting the debate today. It is one of those debates in Westminster Hall about which we can think, "9.30 on a Tuesday morning and a late night—oh my goodness," even though I am passionate about the subject. However, every contributor so far has touched on different aspects and the debate has been really well rounded. I may now not live up to expectations! I thank the Centre for Social Justice, which sent me a briefing, and the Money and Pensions Service for its briefing.

As many Members know, education is devolved in Scotland. We have already incorporated financial education into both the primary and the secondary school curriculums, and we have taken a lead in embedding money management in other aspects of the curriculum. I say this a lot: we do some things differently in Scotland and sometimes that is better. Rather than looking "abroad abroad", perhaps the Government could look at what is being done in Scotland and learn from it. It is a lot cheaper to travel there and it is much easier to talk to folk in Scotland, although we may have a slightly different accent and sometimes our English is not always so intelligible.

Strong financial education is increasingly important in a financial crisis. It is important that people—especially young people, for all the reasons Members have given—have a sound financial backing. I know that many people are suffering. Much of my constituency is in areas of multiple deprivation, and money really matters. It is so important that our constituents know how to manage money better. We all—not just our constituents—need to know how to manage money and use it to best effect. It is very difficult for young people in some areas to understand how money works, because of digital money. I am very fortunate that two of my granddaughters have GoHenry cards that they understand and use, but I know that many of my constituents have never heard of things like

that. They do not understand what is happening and, where there is no access to cash, they are really struggling. It is such a trigger.

The hon. Member for Broadland talked about the mental health aspects of bad financial management and how, if people get themselves into a debt spiral, it becomes more and more difficult to get out. Although there are good local services—in my own constituency, the local council has a tackling poverty team—those in debt sometimes cannot see any way out. It is really important that we give people the tools for now and for the future to enable them to manage money wisely.

It is also very important that people understand the consequences of spending. When I was a further education lecturer at West Lothian College—a number of years ago, it has to be said—I was absolutely appalled at how little my students, who ranged in age from 16 to 60, knew about money management. They had not even heard of things like annual percentage rates. They did not understand the huge amount more that they had to pay because they were buying things on credit and that, if they were able to save, they could have got them much cheaper. That is still the case for many of our poorest people in society. There is a poverty premium. People pay more for accessing services and paying for energy simply because they are poor. We have talked about how we are moving to digital money: so many people are digitally excluded right across the UK, so they are doubly impacted.

Pennies and pounds are lost through misspending. The hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge said that it is another latte; that is a real thing because young people nowadays almost no longer have the ability to save money and earn more. Furthermore, when they come out of university in England—I have to make this point—they are seriously in debt. Students in Scotland come out of university and college in debt as well but not by nearly as much because tertiary education is free in Scotland.

It is vital not only that we put financial education on the curriculum but that it is properly delivered. I want to pay real tribute to MyBnk and to Young Enterprise, mentioned by the hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter). My children also benefited from that kind of thing. In our case, the house smelled of potpourri for years afterwards. It is important that we do all of this. Many external partners do really good work, and teachers would not necessarily inevitably have to take on a further burden. I went to visit MyBnk in its flat in Glasgow. It does great work with care leavers, which the APPG has looked at in the past. They leave care with absolutely no one to help them. It is slightly different now as the age for care support has been increased. I know in Scotland it is 25; I think it has been increased here, too. We need to help those people in that huge area.

I know that I am going slightly off brief, but it is really important that we not just educate young people but reach out and show them—as an organisation, as Parliament—the consequences of the mismanagement of cash. I do not want to see any other generation growing up without understanding where money comes from, how important it is to manage it properly and how important savings are. I now know that. I have learned through bitter experience how important it is.

It is also about making sure that the future is better for all our people. However, it has to be said that there are swathes of the population—here I stray slightly into my disabilities portfolio—for whom it is absolutely impossible to save. They have to juggle money every day to make it stretch as far as they can, and no matter how much work we do here, that will always be the case. That is another seriously good reason why people need financial education for when they find themselves facing a change of life, because it can happen to any of us. I lived for many years from one salary to the next. There was nothing behind. If either I or my husband fell ill or had to give up work, there was no cushion. We have to have financial education so that we can provide cushions for people and so that they can find them when times are tough. As a Government and a Parliament, we also need to provide a sound financial base for those who cannot work and who will therefore still need financial education to enable them to live well.

10.36 am

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to serve under you as Chair, Dame Angela. I am really delighted to take on this role as shadow schools Minister, as part of Labour's education team. I have long believed that every child deserves the best start in life. Ensuring that we have the best schools and the best education and support for all children is key to ensuring that.

I thank the hon. Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) for securing this debate and opening it so thoroughly and for his work on the all-party parliamentary group on financial education for young people. He made a compelling case and set out the issues very clearly indeed. I also pay tribute to the teachers, school staff and charities across the country—which many hon. Members have mentioned—that are working really hard to improve the financial literacy of our young people.

The purpose of education should be to enable young people to understand the world around them, to explore and develop their interests and to prepare them for their futures with the knowledge and skills they will need to thrive throughout life. We know—we have heard many testimonies today—that managing money is fundamental to a person's stability and security. Whether it is working out prices in a supermarket—no tall order—managing a household budget or figuring out the terms of a mortgage or loan, everybody, regardless of their background, needs to be equipped to make these everyday financial decisions. We have heard the evidence: people who are financially literate are much more likely to have savings, to avoid scams and fraud and to invest their money effectively. This should not be left to chance. Financial literacy is important not just to households, but to our society.

We have heard compelling speeches from all Members who have contributed to today's debate—my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) and the hon. Members for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) and for Warrington South (Andy Carter), as well as the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), who contributed previously. This is clearly an issue on which there is a lot of cross-party agreement. A lot of thought and consideration has gone into where we are currently. We need our economy

to grow. Giving financial literacy to more people in our society, and everyone as they grow, will equip them to start new businesses, taking them from start to scale-up, to help to grow our economy and pay for the public services that we all need.

As things stand, too many young people are leaving school without these skills. A number of facts and figures have been given today, but the one that really jumped out at me is the OECD figure that an estimated 10 million people in the UK—a fifth of all adults—are financially illiterate. It is shocking and alarming. The UK ranks in the bottom half of OECD countries in financial literacy. We know that that has consequences not just for those individuals who potentially live in constant financial insecurity, but for our whole economy. Almost 13 million adults struggle to pay their bills—today—and more than half of adults do not have savings that could support them for three months if they lost their primary income. We know that life is becoming increasingly hard as we sit here, day by day, for families up and down the country. We know that the hardest hit people will be those whose budgets are the most stretched and for whom money does not go as far as it used to; they are the ones missing out most on financial education.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Broadland, financial education is patchy across the country, and many schools struggle to teach it. Far too many young people leave school without these skills for life. Only 8% of students cite school as their main source of financial education. A Bank of England survey in March found that almost two thirds of teachers cited a lack of dedicated time in the timetable for delivery. In personal, social, health and economic education, the economic too often drops off the end. That is storing up problems for the future.

Young people say that they want to be taught more life skills in school. The Centre for Social Justice conducted a survey, and four in five said that they worried about money. I hear that from schoolchildren when I visit schools in my local area. Two in three say that they have become more anxious about money as a result of covid. Three in four say that they want to learn more about money—and probably about more money—at school, yet Ofsted has found that there is a postcode lottery in the teaching of financial education and the most disadvantaged are missing out. It is not good enough, and it is storing up problems for the future.

A key part of the current financial literacy strategy comes from the mathematics curriculum, which is supposed to ensure that young people leave school with an understanding of personal financial management and the skills that they need for it. However, the Government have failed to recruit and retain teachers, meaning that one in 10 maths lessons in the past year have been taught by a non-expert. That means that the high standards we want for all our children are being delivered for only some of our children. It is not good enough, and it is storing up problems for the future. That is why the next Labour Government will urgently commission a full, expert-led review of the curriculum and assessment. We need a curriculum that is broad, rich, innovative and develops children's knowledge and skills—a curriculum that ensures children leave school ready for life and builds on the knowledge, skills and attributes that they need to survive. Labour's curriculum review will look to embed those skills in everyday learning.

[Catherine McKinnell]

Following Labour's review of all state schools, including academies, they will be required to teach a core national curriculum, so that every parent knows the essentials of what their child will be taught: there will be a common national standard that gives parents and children certainty. Labour will ensure that children are taught those lessons properly. It means being taught by experts, not by overstretched teachers covering for their colleagues. We will do it by recruiting thousands of new teachers across the country and ensuring that all schools are properly staffed, that maths classes are taught by trained maths teachers and that teachers are given manageable workloads, no longer covering their own job and someone else's.

Education is about opportunity. It is about opportunity for each of us—all of us—our whole lives long. It should enable us to develop the knowledge and skills to explore our interests and thrive throughout life. It is our duty and the Government's duty to ensure that young people do not miss out on that opportunity. I hope that the Minister will outline what the Government are doing to ensure that every child leaves education financially literate and whether the Government will give parents the certainty of knowing that every school follows an agreed, shared national curriculum. I hope the Minister will reassure us that the Government are listening to the important contributions that have been made today and, again, I thank the hon. Member for Broadland for securing the debate.

10.45 am

The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Angela. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) on her appointment as shadow Minister for Schools. I look forward to working with her and debating all these important subjects with her. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) on securing the debate and on the important points that he made in his opening speech. I thank him and the all-party group on financial education for young people for their work on this important issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter), also known as Jo Malone, gave an instructive example of young enterprise and how he gouged his school's finances. As my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland said, evidence shows that the knowledge, attitudes and behaviour that help people to manage money and achieve good financial wellbeing begin to develop from an early age and continue throughout childhood and the teenage years.

Good maths is the gateway to lifelong financial stability. Evidence from the 2018 programme for international student assessment—PISA—shows that there is a strong correlation between performance in financial literacy and performance in mathematics. The correlation was observed in every participating country. There was also a positive correlation between financial literacy and learning finance-related terms at school.

Since 2010 we have made significant progress in ensuring that pupils have a strong grasp of the basics by transforming the way that maths is taught in schools. To ensure the curriculum is taught effectively, we introduced

teaching methods used by top performing countries, particularly in east Asia. The concept of maths mastery aims to ensure that all pupils secure a deep knowledge and understanding of mathematics.

The results of international surveys show that England performs above the international averages for maths in all international studies of school-age pupils. In particular, analysis of PISA 2018 results showed that the performance of 15-year-olds improved significantly in maths, and the trends in international mathematics and science study, known as TIMSS, showed that the performance of England's year 5 pupils was significantly higher in 2019 than in any previous TIMSS survey. The 2023 Ofsted maths subject report also highlights "notable improvements" at secondary, with a "resounding, positive shift" taking place in primary mathematics over recent years.

Our national network of 40 maths hubs also supports schools to improve their maths teaching, including financial content in the mathematics curriculum, based on best practice from east Asia. To build on progress, the Secretary of State recently announced that we will increase the number of schools supported by the maths hubs' teaching for mastery programme so that we reach 75% of primary schools and 65% of secondary schools by 2025.

We want pupils to leave school prepared in the widest sense for adult life. From early years onwards, all children should be taught a broad, ambitious, knowledge-rich curriculum, of which quality financial education is an important component. That ensures that all young people are prepared to manage money and make sound financial decisions. Financial knowledge already forms a compulsory part of the national curriculum for maths at key stages 1 to 4 and citizenship at key stages 3 and 4.

I was delighted to hear from the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) about the success of Martin Lewis's textbook in schools. It is a knowledge-rich textbook and is a primer to the introduction of financial education and the vocabulary of finance.

In the primary maths curriculum there is a strong emphasis on the essential maths that is vital to underpin pupils' ability to manage budgets and money, including, for example, calculations with percentages. The secondary maths curriculum develops students' use of formal maths knowledge to interpret and solve problems such as interest rates and compound interest.

The primary citizenship programme of study equips pupils to understand the sources and purpose of money and the benefits of saving. It makes it clear that financial contexts are useful for learning about making choices and exploring social and moral dilemmas. The secondary citizenship curriculum prepares students to manage their money well and plan for future financial needs, and key stage 3 covers the functions and uses of money, day-to-day money management, budgeting and managing risk. Key stage 4 covers income and expenditure, credit and debt, insurance, savings, pensions, and financial products and services.

My hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) raised concerns about online issues. Using technology safely and responsibly is now taught at all key stages of the computing curriculum, which provides pupils with the e-safety knowledge that they need to make informed decisions while online or using other digital applications and technologies, including in financial contexts. Through statutory relationships,

sex and health education, or RSHE, pupils are taught about internet safety and online harms, such as the risks associated with online gambling and the accumulation of debt. The RSHE curriculum is currently being reviewed, and revised guidance will be published next year.

The 2020 UK strategy for financial wellbeing set a national goal of 2 million more children and young people receiving a meaningful financial education by 2030. The Money and Pensions Service has a statutory duty to co-ordinate the work of the numerous organisations involved in delivering that goal. The service recently published the UK children and young people's financial wellbeing survey, which provides an initial analysis of the progress made towards that national goal. The report found that in 2022 just under half of children and young people aged seven to 17 were receiving a meaningful financial education as defined by the strategy. That is a similar proportion to 2019, which suggests that progress towards the national goal remains static, as my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland mentioned.

There are positive signs that some of the organisations working towards the national goal have delivered financial education lessons to more young people. For example, the work of UK Finance members, which include banks and other financial services, provided 4,300—sorry, 4 million; I think I need some financial education myself. Some 4,307,000 children received a financial education in a school or community setting in 2022, an increase of 63% on 2021. Other evidence from the Money and Pensions Service shows that too many young people are entering adulthood without the knowledge and understanding they need to manage money well. For example, just over half of young people aged 16 and 17 are unable to read a payslip correctly, almost three in 10 are unable to correctly identify the terms for interest and balance, and around a fifth report feeling anxious when thinking about their money, which rises to 50% for 18 to 24-year-olds.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broadland mentioned the APPG report and the fact that 41% of participating secondary school teachers did not know that financial education was required to be taught under the national curriculum. The Department's survey found that 69% of secondary schools taught money management to pupils last year, but that suggests that more needs to be done. That is why the work of the Money and Pensions Service, through its data collection, national strategy and delivery plans, is so important, and why we continue to work closely with the service and other Government Departments. We are also using Oak National Academy; it will be producing materials for citizenship and expects to launch the procurement for that next year.

My hon. Friend also raised the issue of teacher training. Of course, recruiting and retaining teachers is crucial to every curriculum subject, and the Department is driving an ambitious transformation programme to overhaul the process of training to be a teacher. That includes stimulating initial interest through the teaching and marketing campaign, one-to-one support and advice for prospective trainees, and the use of more real-time data on applications. The Department has also made a financial incentive package, which is worth up to £181 million, to encourage people to come into teaching. Recruitment to citizenship teacher training courses is unrestricted—there are no caps on it—which means that initial teacher training providers are free to recruit as many future citizenship teachers as they can teach.

The Money and Pensions Service is investing over £1 million through a grant programme that includes testing approaches to embedding and scaling teacher training in financial education. These projects will run until March next year, with evaluation findings for the programme expected in that year. The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State recently announced the launch of a new fully-funded national professional qualification to be available from February next year that will focus on leadership and teach participants how to embed mastery approaches to the teaching of mathematics throughout a school.

Finally—so that I can give my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland a moment to summarise the debate—I reiterate the Government's commitment to ensuring that all children should be taught a broad, ambitious and knowledge-rich curriculum. Financial education already forms a mandatory part of the national curriculum for mathematics and for citizenship, and rooting financial education in these subjects ensures that the curriculum remains focused on the important knowledge that pupils need to manage their money with confidence.

We have made positive progress in improving attainment in mathematics, which underpins financial application. It is important, though, to build on that success, which is why we are striving to improve financial capability, including through the maths to 18 programme launched by the Prime Minister recently, Oak Academy resources, and the recruitment and retention of excellent teachers. To do this, we need to continue to work closely across Government and in partnership with others. It is right that we approach this in a co-ordinated and joined up way through the work of the Money and Pensions Service's UK strategy and delivery plan for England.

10.56 am

Jerome Mayhew: I have a number of thank yous, alongside those to hon. Members for their excellent contributions. I thank Young Enterprise—which provides the secretariat for the APPG on financial education for young people—and the Centre for Social Justice, the Money and Pensions Service and the Institute and Faculty of Actuaries for their briefings. The latter highlighted a point that has not been brought out in the debate so far: the transfer of risk from organisations to individuals, particularly in pensions, which has accelerated as we have moved towards defined contribution pensions and the ability to sell out our pensions at an earlier stage.

Financial education is a hugely important subject and it has been treated as such by all contributors. My hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) brought to the debate her experience as a teacher. The hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) talked about the skills for life, and the need to use financial education as a tool for social mobility and to close the prosperity gap. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) mentioned important lessons on macroeconomics and tax, which may veer into politics in schools.

The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) shared her experience as an FE lecturer and spoke about the poverty premium. That is a really important point; there is a poverty premium in this country, and financial education is the kind of subject that can help to address it. I congratulate the hon.

[Jerome Mayhew]

Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) on her new position, and thank her for bringing her perspective.

Finally, I thank the Minister for engaging with me on this subject. There is so much agreement on the state of the problem, but in my submission there is more work to be done on the strength of the answer. I recognise the work of the Money and Pensions Service, and I hear with interest the plans for the Oak National Academy and the new work it has planned for next year. I look forward to many further discussions as we work together to improve in this policy area.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered financial education in schools.

Veterans: Handforth

11 am

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered veterans in Handforth.

It is a pleasure to have you chairing this debate, Dame Angela. I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for listening to the concerns of my Tatton constituents. This topic should and, I am sure, does concern each and every one of us, as it is about the support that we provide to our servicemen and women as they leave the armed forces and prepare for civilian life. I am here today representing veterans and their families in Handforth, who feel “forgotten about”. Those words struck a particular chord. They said that they had served in the armed forces, but when they left service, they felt that there was an abruptness to that end of service and very little help for them to adjust back into civilian life. To be blunt, they have struggled with that transition. Most importantly, they feel that it does not need to be that way. With more structured support, clear signposting and ongoing checks—interestingly, they mentioned to me a check at the seven-year mark—the transition could have been so much easier.

The veterans felt that much greater care and attention was given to the whole process of getting them into the armed forces than was given to them when they left. Removing “the individual” and fitting them into an organisation had a lot of thought put into it, but reversing that process it did not. They explained to me that, on arrival, each was given a number. They would be drilled and trained, and pushed both physically and mentally. It is a form of training that makes them a team and part of a great institution—without doubt one of the best in the world. They were absolutely proud to serve in that institution, but it does become their life. They said that it did become their mind in a way, controlling what they did in their thought processes.

Therefore, my constituents are asking for a similar process in reverse, and with as much thought and consideration, as they step away from the armed forces. To give up life in the armed forces and regain one’s autonomy might sound easy, but it had not been. They had had their time managed and their life controlled, so to now get the freedoms to do what they wanted and fill the hours was actually quite daunting. Without that drilled schedule, without every moment being filled, they felt that time dragged, allowing loneliness and depression to sink into their lives.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Lady for bringing this debate forward. She truly is a champion for veterans and she should be congratulated on her determination to do right by those who have done right for us. Does she agree that tremendous work is carried out by veterans charities such as the Royal British Legion or SSAFA, which I have helped over the last number of years? On Saturday past, I did a coffee morning with SSAFA and we raised some £5,500—just through coffee and scones—which is quite something. Such charities do a tremendous job, yet that does not and cannot absolve Government of the responsibility to our veterans and their families. The right hon. Lady is saying that. I fully support her and hope that the Minister is listening.

Esther McVey: The hon. Member is spot on. It is absolutely the case that those charities do a wonderful job, but greater structured support is needed. My constituents are asking the Minister to make the process easier even before discharge. They are asking that people be signposted and helped even before leaving, so that they know the local area that they are going back into, the local groups and the local community. That would make leaving so much easier; it would provide them with stability and a clearer transition to their new life.

In my constituency, there is a very interesting group. These people are passionate about not seeing the experience they had repeated. Sebastian and Gianna Edwards-Beech have set up a support group called NAAFI Break. They welcome veterans and their family members for support. Each week, 18 to 25 people turn up, and they have those discussions, those talks and that helping hand, which is offered over, as they say, a hot beverage. It was at one such session that they asked whether I could relay to the Minister their overwhelming concern that, once discharged, they felt they had nowhere to go. They felt there was a distinct lack of signposting and no central point where information was available. While they appreciated that there was an array of charities, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has said, they felt that somehow the Ministry of Defence needed to do a little more and not contract out its responsibilities to others. They felt the support was bitty, piecemeal and the exact opposite of the training they were given to enter the armed forces, which was precise and regimented.

For example, when Sebastian was discharged and started showing signs of post-traumatic stress disorder, his wife Gianna felt as if she had nowhere to turn. She said that the lack of signposting both by the Government and the MOD left her feeling angry and rejected. She was sent from one organisation to another, and found the delay in receiving support for her husband quite shocking. When I asked Gianna what exactly she would like to see happen, she said she would like to see something simple and quite tangible, such as a book, issued to each service member and/or their family member when leaving the forces, containing a list of contacts and the assistance on offer. That way, they would have a first line of response. Therefore, my first question is: will the Minister look into providing something like a physical booklet? Gianna said that that tangibility—if I can say that—was important. Yes, it would be good if that simple advice were online, but she felt that having a book—which she might not need straight away, on day one, or in week one or year one, but which she could go to later as things emerged—would allow her to feel comforted.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for her excellent speech. I am a serviceman. I left the Army in 2019 with no resettlement and no termination but through choice, to become a candidate for the Conservative party. I do not regret it, but having gone through that process and been left on a cliff edge with that immediate loss from the Department, I would say to my right hon. Friend that I empathise greatly with all the concerns raised by veterans. I am also chair of the all-party parliamentary group on veterans, and my experience of veterans, having left the Army myself, is that the issue in most cases is not that veterans once served, it is that they are no longer serving. There is a distinction.

We have highlighted a number of issues today, and I wish to make two points very quickly. First, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, there are a lot of agencies, charities and organisations that can help, such as RBL and SSAFA. I would urge everyone to make contact with them. I would also want to see the MOD, with the Minister in his place, doing a catch-up, reaching out a bit more to those who have left and having that single point of contact or repository, whereby people do not feel quite so isolated from the organisation they served. Yes, there is a plethora of support out there, but a bit more from the MOD for those who have left the forces would be welcome.

Dame Angela Eagle (in the Chair): Before I call Esther to reply, can I say that interventions have to be brief, especially in debates of this kind, where other speeches are not allowed? I have been lenient once; I will not be again.

Esther McVey: Thank you, Dame Angela, and I thank my hon. Friend for that honest contribution, particularly with such great first-hand knowledge.

To continue with my other point, I was sat next to a very impressive woman who had served and done well in the Army, but who was struggling now that she had left. She, too, felt abandoned. She had gone into the Army to get away from her life. The Army was a fresh start and a new beginning for her. She had grown there and done well. However, on leaving, she felt she was put right back into the place that she had tried to escape from. That left her depressed, as if she had walked back in time, back into the problems that she had tried to get away from. She felt it was worse for her, as there were no other women close by who she could relate to and who shared her experiences. She had seen a lot during her time in the Army.

That woman is based in Cheshire. The support groups for women were in the cities, in Liverpool and Manchester, and meeting online for her was not the same as seeing people face to face. She wondered how she could connect with other veterans, particularly female veterans, who are scattered across the country, without having to incur all the significant travel costs.

All at the session were concerned about support for those with PTSD, particularly those who had been in Afghanistan and Iraq, understanding how it develops and the treatment accompanying it. I have another question for the Minister. How much research have the Government done—or are doing—into PTSD and its treatment, as well as into traumatic brain injury, which is linked to PTSD? Traumatic brain injuries are often overlooked, but they can have devastating effects on physical and mental wellbeing. They can cause memory loss, cognitive impairment, mood swings and a range of debilitating symptoms that can significantly impact a veteran's ability to reintegrate into civilian life.

Many believe that, despite the growing body of scientific evidence linked to traumatic brain injury and PTSD, the UK Government have failed to allocate the necessary resources and funding for a comprehensive researched diagnosis into the treatment and conditions. If that is the case, we are doing a disservice to our veterans, which does not live up to the promises made in the armed forces covenant. I hope the Minister can reassure me that that is not the case, and that much work is being and has been done.

[*Esther McVey*]

When he responds to the debate, will the Minister let me and my constituents know what the Government are doing to support veterans with mental health conditions and how they intend to support them and their families? My constituents are helpfully proposing that, either prior to or after discharge date, the MOD sends individuals to a medical facility for an all-round health screening, to diagnose any injuries that have been missed while on active service. That could also lead to an understanding of what might happen to them in future.

The armed forces covenant, established in 2011, was intended to be a solemn agreement that our Government and local authorities would provide adequate support, recognition and assistance to those who had served our Army in uniform. I would like an update on what the Government are doing to adhere to that covenant.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): My right hon. Friend raised the armed forces covenant. She is right to raise those concerns, which will be relevant to all armed forces veterans. In my constituency, despite the armed forces covenant, individuals in MOD accommodation find that, when they come to the end of their service, the time allowed to move to other accommodation, in a place where it is difficult to get housing, is far too short and must be reviewed. Does my right hon. Friend agree, with all the work she is doing, that the best place to start is to ensure secure housing? Should that be reviewed by the Minister?

Esther McVey: My hon. Friend is right that they need a safe home. That is part of the connection to the local community, before they even leave the armed forces. What is that signposting? Who are those local groups? That of course includes, where do they sleep? Where is that roof over their head?

Apart from the anti-discrimination policies in the armed forces covenant, there are concerns about the wording. It is not definitive enough, such as when a local authority or business is tasked with supporting a veteran. The wording is “where possible”. That means there is no obligation, and veterans often feel that they are “palmed off”—in their words—to charities or other voluntary bodies, because there is not a sufficiently worded obligation in the current form. Will the Minister talk a little more about that wording and that obligation that I know we would all like to see?

Finally, I come to the armed forces compensation scheme. Those who had applied and qualified felt the experience was of delays and complicated process. Will the Minister give an update on how that process will be made smoother and faster? I know we all believe in honouring our veterans, and that means ensuring that when they leave the armed forces they can reintegrate into civilian life in a smooth, coherent, supported way, so they do not feel abandoned and lost. The one way that can be done is to provide the assistance they so rightly deserve.

11.14 am

The Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): I start by declaring my interest as a veteran and an active reservist. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (*Esther McVey*) on securing the debate and the way in which

she has presented it. I know she has a deep interest in veterans’ affairs, which shines through, and she has been a passionate advocate for her Handforth constituents and veterans in general. Her aim is to make life better for the men and women who put themselves in harm’s way in the service of our country, and I certainly share that goal.

My right hon. Friend reflected thoughtfully on the question of what we might call signposting. At the time of my first stint as a Defence Minister a decade ago, there was an impenetrable maze of veteran provisions without any realistic road map for navigating it. It was bitty—I think that was the term that my right hon. Friend used. In the meantime, there have been significant improvements, although I am the first to admit that we are not there yet. The MOD actively supports vulnerable service leavers to make the most successful transition possible to civilian life, building on the substantial skills and experience they have accrued in the armed forces.

I am bound to represent to my right hon. Friend the Veterans’ Gateway, which offers a pretty good first point of contact for all former personnel and their families who need access to both the state and charitable sectors. It offers help with pretty much everything, from finances to families, housing to health and independent living to mental wellbeing, and I really commend it. We should all be concerned about delays in getting assistance to veterans, which my right hon. Friend touched on. Ideally, there should be no gap between the request for and the provision of help. Realistically, the system caters for approximately 1.85 million veterans, each with individual issues that may or may not be related to service and requiring different contact with myriad organisations, from Government and local authorities to the charitable sector. To give an idea of the scale of the work, some 450,000 veterans receive an armed forces pension—happily, me included—and last year the veterans’ welfare service handled calls from almost 40,000 people.

Unfortunately, even with the best efforts of the dedicated staff who fill out the forms and operate the phone lines, people can slip through the net; usually we hear from them, not from those who are satisfied with the service they receive. I have visited Norcross near Blackpool to talk to those whose job it is to manage those sometimes quite difficult calls, and I have been impressed by a couple of things: first by their longevity in the job, and secondly by the sense of dedication they have to servicing the needs of their clients’ community. Claims for compensation, for example, have long been hampered by a reliance on paper records—a theme that I have talked about before. The staff at Norcross operate in, frankly, an outdated environment that does not match their commitment and expertise. We need to do away with all those paper records. While it may sound boring, I am convinced that those paper records are at the heart of some of the delays we have seen. They are not the only reason, and I am more than happy to describe at greater length the cause of those delays, but we must drag the systems at Norcross kicking and screaming into the 21st century.

James Sunderland: The Minister will recall that we met earlier this year in the all-party parliamentary group on veterans and discussed the much-needed reform of Veterans UK. As part of his closing address, or perhaps in the near future, is he able to provide an

update to the House on where we are with the review of Veterans UK and any subsequent work that needs to be done?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He and I have discussed this before. I am afraid that I will not be able to show very much ankle on this occasion, but in my remarks I will certainly touch on where we are with the two commissioned reviews, which will improve matters as part of the process I described. In the meantime, we have invested £40 million to digitally transform veterans' services and phase out paper, which is so much impeding the quality of the service we want to offer our veterans. We are introducing online verification, which will make it much quicker and easier to establish veteran status, and that is also why we have introduced the reviews to which my hon. Friend refers.

There have been calls for medical checks when people leave active service to allow for the early spotting of traumatic brain injuries, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton rightly touched on. It is an issue that I, as a military medic, have a long-standing interest in. Remarkably, in Afghanistan a British combat soldier was likely to face exposure to between six and nine improvised explosive device explosions, with the consequent risk of mild traumatic brain injury. That is a staggering figure.

Moderate to severe traumatic brain injury should be detected at the time of injury and managed accordingly. The diagnosis of mild traumatic brain injury is generally made clinically on referral to the Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre at Stanford Hall, which operates a dedicated treatment programme for TBI of all levels of severity.

As for medical assessments conducted at discharge, their purpose is to assess and record the physical and mental health status of individuals at point of departure. All episodes of ill health during service will be reviewed at that time, and an assessment will be made and recorded about whether there has been any interaction between health and work. Our duty of care to people is principally to ensure that any disadvantage that they have suffered as a result of their service is remedied as best we can; that is at the heart of the military covenant, as my right hon. Friend will well appreciate. That assessment, at that time, is part of that duty.

The real sticking point here is that mild TBI is generally not visible on routine clinical imaging. The US has something called magnetoencephalography, which it has deployed to try to detect who has mild TBI and who does not. We have our own Independent Medical Expert Group that assesses these things, and it has assessed magnetoencephalography twice. It has found that magnetoencephalography is not sensitive and specific enough to be of use as a screening test at the moment, but naturally it keeps all evidence under review and that position may well change. In the meantime, our own Defence Medical Services is part of a national civilian and military collaboration called mTBI-Predict, and that is looking for reliable biomarkers, which may include—but are not confined to—magnetoencephalography.

I turn to the possibility of rewording the armed forces covenant to encourage authorities to treat veterans as a priority more energetically. I share my right hon. Friend's appreciation of the value of our armed forces covenant. Indeed, I wrote the book on it 12 years ago,

which is sadly now out of print, although a colleague said he had seen a copy recently in a charity shop. He then went on to spoil the story by saying that he did not bother buying it! Nevertheless, I am particularly proud that this Government, in their very early days, put the covenant into legislation—at about the time that I was writing my book—and that organisations are now able to sign up to it, as so many have, including all local authorities in Great Britain.

We should not forget that the covenant is not about advantaging members of the armed forces community; it is not about placing them at the front of the queue or mandating outcomes. I do not think that is what veterans and the service community want. The covenant is about ensuring that people are not disadvantaged by virtue of having served. That “no disadvantage” enjoinder lies at the very heart of the covenant we have built.

The Armed Forces Act 2021 introduced a new statutory duty to promote better outcomes for the armed forces community when accessing key public services. That duty came into force in November 2022. It requires certain public bodies to have due regard to the covenant's principles when carrying out specific functions in the key areas of housing, healthcare and education. In other words, it is there to give veterans a fairer hearing and to ensure that service providers have the needs of the armed forces community in mind when making policy decisions. We will evaluate the impact of the new legislation as it beds in; we will report on it annually in the armed forces covenant and veterans annual report; and in any event, as we are bound by statute, we will report on it formally after five years.

All service people, from private soldiers to Chief of the Defence Staff, come to defence from civilian life, and to civilian life they will return. Preparing for that inevitability is not something that should happen in a rush in someone's last few weeks spent in uniform, but from day one. That is why accredited training, skills and education are so important and is why issues like facilitating spousal employment and encouraging personnel to buy their own homes early have been, and will continue to be, firmly in our sights.

I would like to sound a cautionary note. The tabloid press likes to suggest that the veteran living in a cardboard box underneath the arches is typical. That is a complete 180° reversal of the truth. Overwhelmingly, our service leavers transition brilliantly, as one might expect considering that they are resourceful, enabled individuals with in-demand skills and attributes, but there are exceptions and we should be constantly kicking the tyres to see what more we can do to maximise the resilience of our service leavers.

Our holistic transition policy, published in October 2019, was designed to better co-ordinate and manage service personnel and their families transitioning from military to civilian life. Whether that means helping with the basics, such as registering with a doctor, or offering more intensive assistance for those with complex needs including those related to housing, budgeting, debt, wellbeing, employment and children's education, it is there for them. Holistic transition builds on the success of the career transition partnership, which has provided employment support and job finding services for the last 20 years. Last year, 87% of service leavers were employed within six months of leaving their service. I want that to improve, but that is 12% higher than the

[Dr Murrison]

UK employment rate, which validates the remarks I made about the majority of our service leavers being in a good position by virtue of having served. The holistic transition policy gives tailored interventions to service leavers assessed as needing extra help. That is done through the defence transition service. It is one to one, provides tailored information and guidance and facilitates access to support services, including from other Government Departments, local authorities, the NHS and trusted charities.

I underscore the contribution of charities. Some disparage charities and say that it is all the responsibility of the state. I disagree. I think our service charities do an absolutely fantastic job and need to be encouraged in what they do.

Mindful of the compensation touched on by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton, in July the Ministry of Defence and the Office for Veterans' Affairs published a review of the Government's veterans' welfare services alongside the statutory quinquennial review of the armed forces compensation scheme. I will not pre-empt the Government's response to the reviews. That will come later this year—I hope very much not too much later. Suffice to say, those reviews prove that the only way to meet our aspiration of making the UK a truly great place to be a veteran is to continue to listen to what they say, both directly and through their elected representatives as in this debate.

A fortnight ago, I was honoured to be asked to speak in Kyiv at a conference for veterans hosted by the Government of Ukraine. I am pleased that a country that will, as a result of Putin's aggression, have a large number of veterans, some with the most complex of needs, should, at both ministerial and official level, be looking to the UK for advice and looking at our structures as it works out what it should now do. I find endorsement in that and I am humbled by it.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Access to Broadband Services

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered access to broadband services.

It is good to see you in your place, Sir Christopher, and I am delighted to see so many colleagues from across the House with an interest in broadband. It is close to our hearts in Stirling. I find myself saying quite a lot that in Stirling we have the best broadband in the UK, and we also have the worst broadband in the UK, which I think a number of us, representing urban and rural areas, will have in common. I represent an area that is about as big as Luxembourg, with a huge rural territory, and I am focused on rural broadband provision.

In St Ninians in Stirling, I have fantastic full-fibre broadband. I have nothing to complain about personally, but I am deeply concerned for an awful lot of people I represent who I fear are being left behind by Government policy. I say that mentioning two Governments: the Scottish Government and the UK Government. Telecoms is reserved, but the Scottish Government have been active in this field. I want to reach out to colleagues today and say, "Let's identify the problems together and work together." We are going to need to work with the private sector, the state sector and community groups to bridge the gap that we see, because we cannot leave anyone behind.

I will do a brief stocktake of where we are, identify some of the problems and suggest a few solutions, because the people we all serve want to see an outcome to today's debate, not just a bumping of gums. I am particularly grateful to the House of Commons Library and the Chamber Engagement Team, who have put together some very thorough briefs on this issue. I have had a number of briefings from stakeholders. I have done site visits with Lothian Broadband, Virgin Media and National Broadband. I am also grateful to Paul Anderson in my team for pulling it all together and explaining to me what some of the big words mean, because there is a technical aspect to all this that few of us are across.

I would like to start on a note of agreement. I think we can agree that broadband is not a "nice to have"; it is a necessity. It is the fourth utility. Covid has accelerated everything—it was the great accelerator. It has accelerated trends that were already there, such as people shopping online, doing their banking online and accessing Government services online, particularly as the Post Office seems to be more interested in closing branches than providing services. Banks are closing their branches with gay abandon, particularly in rural areas. That makes broadband more important for rural areas, and it makes joining up rural areas to good broadband even more imperative than it is for urban areas.

There is a moral aspect to all this. People working from home need good broadband. As we see more and more people expected to work from home—and I am fully in favour of that, for all sorts of positive reasons, such as work-life balance and fewer carbon emissions—people in rural areas are being excluded from that potential benefit, because they do not have the broadband they need.

There is a social aspect to this, not least in terms of the substantial amount of public money—Scottish and UK—that is going towards it and the substantial amount of private money that has been invested, for which companies can legitimately expect an honest return. Joining up rural areas is important, and we need to see a greater focus on it. Broadband will revitalise rural areas at a point when, as we are recovering from covid, so many other factors are militating against them. I have talked about the cutting back of services in other areas. That makes broadband even more important.

There has been no shortage of Government activity. I would like to think I have a good relationship with the Minister on this and many other points, and I want to find solutions here. There is a substantial amount of public money being put towards this. Telecoms is reserved to the UK Government, whose Project Gigabit programme is £5 billion of public expenditure. Its objective is for 80% of the network to be built privately, with a subsidy for harder-to-reach areas. I agree with that focus. Gigabit broadband is to be available to 85% of the UK by 2025 and to the rest by 2030. The cynic in me says that those sound like rather round numbers, and we always need to be conscious of the sound of deadlines whooshing past us. I represent a big chunk of the 15%, and I want to see faster activity and a better focus on rural areas, for the reasons I have outlined.

The Scottish Government, for their part, have recognised that there are gaps in provision. As we have a third of the UK land mass, we have a lot of rural areas to cover, as well as the islands. The Scottish Government created the Reaching 100%—R100—scheme and put £600 million behind it, as well as a £49.5 million UK Government spend. We are working together on this, and I want to see more of that. I want us to work together to target the areas that need it, although I fear that is not quite where we are at the moment.

We have rightly seen significant private sector engagement, and the Scottish National Investment Bank has been helping with access to patient capital. I have seen that locally in Cowie, Plean and Fallin to the east of Stirling. The eastern villages are having full-fibre broadband rolled out, with the help of Scottish National Investment Bank money, and that is very welcome. But in the spirit of constructive engagement, which I hope I have demonstrated, we all need to ask whether those schemes are all actively delivering and whether there is sufficient co-ordination across the private sector to avoid needless duplication in the roll-out of broadband.

In January 2022, the Public Accounts Committee found that the gigabit roll-out “risks perpetuating digital inequality”. House of Commons Library research shows that only 48.7% of premises in Stirling have gigabit availability, despite Stirling’s having, as I say, some of the best broadband that exists. We have download speeds of 43.9 megabits per second. That is less than half the UK average of 111.6 megabits per second.

We need to do better, and I have a few suggestions. The focus of both the UK and Scottish schemes has been on full-fibre connectivity. I agree with that—that is the gold standard—but it does mean the physical infrastructure is that much more expensive, particularly in rural areas. I make a plea for alternative means of delivery to be considered. Satellite and 4G broadband may well be a way of massively increasing provision—perhaps not as far as full fibre might, but if full fibre is

several decades away, as I fear it may be for some places, there are solutions that exist right now that could take over. The broadband provided by alternative solutions might not be as effective, but it will be transformative for those areas now.

National Broadband, with which I had a useful meeting and which provided me with a lot of good information, has calculated that by using alternative technologies, it could supply all 435,000 premises UK-wide without access to broadband with a faster connection for just 3% of the budget of Project Gigabit. That strikes me as a transformative offer for an awful lot of rural areas, and we need to look at it seriously.

I also suggest that, as well as better focus of the subsidy and where it goes, we need better co-ordination of the regulatory aspect of how the private sector companies involved are rolling these schemes out, because there are instances where we have not seen the co-ordination that we need. I am thinking particularly about local authorities with lots of different rules and permitted development rights not being quite tracked through the way they need to be, creating a picture that is more complicated than it needs to be, but also private sector companies not talking to competitors, as they would see them.

We also need to look at what is being delivered. If we have reached the point where one player in the market can make a virtue of delivering the speeds people are paying for, that hints that an awful lot of people are not getting the speeds they are paying for and, indeed, that the taxpayer has subsidised. We need much more active regulation of the roll-out of Project Gigabit and R100, as well as the return on investment that companies are legitimately able to make. They should make a return, but I do think we need to see greater consequences for non-delivery of expectations.

A lot of solutions exist right now. I represent an awful lot of people in rural Scotland who want the same services that everybody else has, and we need to do better on their behalf. I think that applies to an awful lot of our constituencies, and I will work with anybody to help serve them.

2.38 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) for securing this important debate. I found his speech incredibly constructive.

Getting better broadband connections for my constituents in Meon Valley has been a key part of my work in Parliament. It is a largely rural constituency, and when I was elected, part of it was in the bottom 5% in the country for broadband speed. I am pleased that the gigabit voucher scheme is bringing better connections to thousands of people. I have spent hours on queries with Openreach and Building Digital UK, and supporting groups working on community fibre programmes. I am very grateful to both organisations and to Hampshire County Council for helping me to achieve results. Villages such as Upham, Owslebury, Cheriton, Kilmeston and Bramdean, which have been in the bottom 5%, will now be near the top of the table.

Other constituents are now looking towards CityFibre, under the recently announced procurement, and I will be looking to BDUK to provide greater clarity on when

[Mrs Flick Drummond]

that will start. This is an example of Government enabling vital infrastructure in my constituency and I welcome it wholeheartedly.

The covid pandemic highlighted very quickly the crucial role of broadband in Meon Valley and other rural areas. I have a number of constituents who worked in senior positions on the covid response and found it difficult to work remotely because of the slow speeds, so I was grateful to Openreach for its quick response to my request for help. For example, one NHS consultant who was working on the pandemic could only upload his slides and information over several hours, normally overnight. Openreach helped to sort that quickly, although his son had to dig the trench to enable the internet cable to be brought to their property.

People who were working at home with children trying to access schooling was another issue, and it showed our dependency on the internet for information. The future of education and work is very dependent on our access to the internet, and we will have to find ways to keep up with technology so that our country can build a successful economy.

However, we must be careful that we do not build barriers to some people. I have many older constituents in Meon Valley who are concerned about being left behind. We see banks closing because so many people now bank online, and GP appointment systems are becoming increasingly web-based, as is ticketing for events and travel.

I am grateful to Age UK for its work in this area. It has surveyed people aged over 65 about access to public services online, and its findings are troubling, with 22% saying that they do not use the internet at all. Many of those who do are limited in what they do online. Many read about scams and hacking, and so are too frightened to use the internet. Few are engaged in complex tasks, and older people may not be experienced in navigating websites, which often differ in their form and function.

I would be grateful to hear from the Minister what plans we have to help those who are not computer literate, because a lack of computer literacy is increasingly isolating for a large part of my community. Is there a fund that people can access for training? We are spending huge amounts of money building the infrastructure, but can people access it?

If there are areas where there remain challenges to deploying fixed broadband links, we need to be ready to move quickly to bring alternative wireless solutions to people who need them, especially those in remote areas, as the hon. Member for Stirling articulated. Better mobile and data connectivity through 5G is vital for everyone, whether they live in the countryside or in a town. Connectivity deserves the same priority as physical forms of infrastructure. Businesses such as the many farms in my constituency, public services such as education and health, as well as constituents, all depend on the availability of good access to mobile data and telephony.

High-speed connections are now part of our vital infrastructure and the Government must make sure that we continue to improve our connectivity by using the latest technology. Combined with digital confidence, that will have a major impact on our growing economy.

2.43 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher.

If I may, I will tell a little story about Hull. Hull is the only place in the whole of the United Kingdom that has white telephone boxes. They go back a very long time, to when British Telecom was introduced and the rest of the country ended up with the red telephone boxes that we are all familiar with. In Hull, there was a company called Kingston Communications, which was owned by the council. When all the rest of the country was going to have red telephone boxes with British Telecom, it decided that we would keep our own white boxes.

The legacy of that, aside from the white telephone boxes themselves, was that up until a few years ago—as I was very proud to tell everybody—there was more full-fibre high-speed broadband under the streets of Hull than under any other city in the country. That is a pretty impressive fact. I think that we have around 97% or 98% access to full-fibre high-speed broadband within the boundaries of the city of Hull, so people might wonder why I would attend a debate all about access to broadband.

We have that legacy of full-fibre broadband, but because of our other legacy of not having BT or Openreach, all the infrastructure within the city of Hull is owned by the new company KCOM, which was originally Kingston Communications. As a result, we have never had an awful lot of competition in Hull. That was great when people phoned up and tried to flog us broadband, because we could say, “Check my postcode. Don’t bother. You’re not going to be able to provide it to me.”

However, we now have a problem where new companies are coming into the city. On the one hand, it is positive that there is competition; on the other hand, those companies are coming into the city and wanting to put their own broadband poles up. One company, MS3, came along and said, “We want to put our own broadband poles up right across the city,” even though there is existing full-fibre broadband. Another company, Connexin, then said, “We want to come and put up our full-fibre broadband poles and offer a service to the city,” so it is coming along and putting its poles up as well. Then another company, Grain, came along and said, “We would like to offer full-fibre broadband to the people of Hull, so we’re going to have a go at digging up the roads.” We have a situation right now in Hull where three broadband companies, all at the same time, are either digging up the streets or sticking their own poles up, all wanting to be an alternative provider to the existing Kingston Communications.

Residents are incredibly upset. They are saying, “Hang on a minute. You’re digging up my road. Only last month, another company was digging up my road and sticking its poles in.” On some streets, it is not uncommon to see the poles of two different broadband providers, and in some cases even three, all trying to offer the same product. Some poles have been put in ridiculous places, and the building works have blocked people’s driveways and their access to their properties, causing a huge amount of upset.

On one lovely estate in my constituency, which I refer to as the Jenny Brough estate and which was only built in 1997, residents were told, “Any infrastructure you

have on the estate must be underground,” so there were no poles. They woke up, however, to find that someone was sticking poles along their street without consultation. I am pleased to say that the company involved will now talk to residents, but crucially—this is what I want to press with the Minister—residents have no right to refuse the poles, even if there are existing poles and everybody on the street says they do not want them. I am sure colleagues will appreciate that if someone tries to get permission for a dropped kerb for their property, they have to jump through hundreds of hoops, yet any broadband provider can come along and say, “We want to provide broadband, so we want to put our pole there—and by the way, council, we’re giving you statutory notice and we’re going to go ahead and do it.” There is no way for anybody to tell it that it cannot.

I have been working closely with my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) on this. Telegraph poles erected by designated communications network operators for the expansion of fibre to the premises do not need planning permission under the Electronic Communications Code (Conditions and Restrictions) 2003 and the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015. The only requirement on the operator is to provide 28 days’ notice to the local planning authority. It does not need permission; it just needs to give notice. There is no requirement to consider, as an alternative, under-street cabling. The local planning authority can only make suggestions to the telecoms company; the company is under no obligation to follow them. Even if the local planning authority said, “Actually, we’d much rather you went underground,” the provider could say, “Well, you might, but we’re going to do it this way because it’s cheaper.”

There is a cabinet siting and pole siting code of practice, which states that operators should place a site notice where new poles are to be installed, but it is not legislation; it is not statutory. The code states that the notice should indicate

“to nearby residents the intention to install a pole, and the proposed location,”

but ultimately, there is currently no way for any member of the public to challenge legally where that pole is going. Even if it is at the end of their driveway, they have no legal right to challenge where it is going. It is all a voluntary code of conduct and is all meant to be done in negotiation.

In the case of digging up the streets, telecoms companies are statutory undertakers for the purpose of the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991. That means that, like utility companies, they have a general right to install infrastructure on or under public roads and to carry out associated street works. They are also required to notify the relevant highway authority—but, again, they do not need consent. They can come along and dig up the road, and they do not need consent; they just need to have told the local planning authority that they are going to do it.

As I said, in Hull and in Hessle, which is also part of my constituency, we have all these providers wanting to put their own poles up. One of the providers has said, “Look, if we are looking at a street and there are already two poles up, we’re not going to go and put a

third one up,” but that does not stop another company coming along and saying, “Well, actually, we want to do it. We’re going to stick our own pole up as well.”

I want the Minister to intervene. Why on earth is Ofcom not forcing these companies to come to some kind of sharing agreement or arrangement on infrastructure? A fair market price could be agreed by the regulator, which could say, “Actually, I’m sorry, but you cannot be the third provider to dig up the same street and stick your own poles all along it, blocking access for wheelchairs and prams, and making the road bumpy and difficult for elderly people to access.” Why can Ofcom not tell them to get together and ask them, “What’s a fair market price? Let’s agree that and sort it out. We can have the competition”—good, we do not want a monopoly—“but don’t, each of you, individually, stick your poles up all down the street”?

Ofcom has been completely reluctant to intervene. It says that this is not a matter for it and that it is fair competition. Ultimately, however, the consumer is paying for all these poles going up. They are the ones who are being charged higher broadband prices to pay for all this unwanted infrastructure. I would like the Minister to join me in calling on Ofcom to look at this issue more seriously and at the legacy situation in Hull. It needs to force these companies to work together and agree a fair market price, and it needs to stop each of them, individually, digging up the same road.

I would also like to meet the Minister to discuss what we can do to limit the number of companies coming around to dig up the streets, causing major inconvenience and blocking our pavements. As the law stands, it seems that absolutely no one has the ability to stop them.

2.51 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith), who made an excellent introductory speech, and others who have spoken in the debate so far. In my economics O-level, at the time of the privatisation of BT, I did an essay on Kingston Communications, so this is bringing it all back.

As the hon. Member said, broadband has become something of a necessity in the modern world, in terms of connecting people to the broader economy and, indeed, in terms of safety. I will obviously focus on my rural communities in the south lakes and Eden—let us call it greater Westmorland—and not being able to access decent-quality, fast broadband makes people literally unsafe in terms of their access to emergency services. It also has an impact on their ability to perform in and contribute to the local economy. I have often said that if someone could live in Westmorland and make a living there, they just would, because it is a wonderful place to live. Over time—this includes today, of course—that has become difficult to do. Having said that, with the rise of access to better broadband, people can increasingly make a living working from home. Broadband is one way in which we can make rural communities genuinely thrive, make them economically active and see the return of younger families, with children going to our schools to keep them open. So broadband is massively important, and rural communities should have the same access as urban ones.

[Tim Farron]

I will focus my remarks on Project Gigabit and its pros and cons and on some of the issues we are dealing with in Westmorland and elsewhere in Cumbria. Project Gigabit seeks to ensure that there is wider broadband access for difficult-to-reach communities. It will achieve that to some degree—it is important to put that on the record and to be positive about the good that the project is doing and will do—but it will not do so entirely. The communities that get missed are the kind that I represent in Westmorland.

Many of those homes, businesses and community buildings will remain without a connection, despite Project Gigabit. The procurement area in Cumbria contains roughly 60,800 properties that are in need of connection. Roughly 59,000 are estimated to be in scope of the procurement contract, which means 97% will be connected if all goes to plan. That is not to be sniffed at. That is good news. For all those properties that will be connected, it will make a significant difference to them and to the families and businesses that operate within them.

That leaves 1,800 premises in the procurement area that Project Gigabit recognises as needing connection, but for which no solution currently exists. My criticism of the Government's approach is that, by giving the contract to a large corporation—in our case Fibrus, which is a capable outfit, run by very nice and competent people—they have marginalised communities and premises that would benefit from a more community-based, agile and bespoke operation that could mean that the 1,800 properties got connected.

It so happens that we have one such operation in Cumbria. I am sure the Minister is aware of B4RN—Broadband for the Rural North. We are incredibly proud of its work and its track record. It is a community benefit society. In the past few years, it has worked with some of the hardest-to-reach rural communities in Cumbria and north Lancashire, especially South Lakeland, to deliver full-fibre gigabit internet to thousands of homes, businesses and community buildings. That work has been an important part of Project Gigabit and, indeed, of the Government's levelling-up agenda. It has been supported by Government's voucher scheme. The disappointing thing for me and so many of us in Cumbria is that, over the past year, the Government have greatly reduced access to the gigabit voucher scheme, which has had the—I assume unintended—effect of stifling B4RN's progress in connecting our rural communities, at the very moment when we should encourage it to move further and faster.

Will the Minister state whether it is the Government's policy to move funding from successful community organisations such as B4RN, which connect every property in their area, to procurement that does not connect every property and is delivered through large, profit-driven corporations? Or, preferably, will he commit to working with organisations such as B4RN right now, and not defer the decision for a year or two to see how things go, to find ways of enabling it to continue its delivery side by side with those larger procurements? Is he willing to meet me and representatives of B4RN and some of the affected communities, which B4RN would otherwise be connecting, so that we can have the clarification that our rural communities in Eden and South Lakeland need?

I want to be clear: I am not saying that Project Gigabit procurements are bad; quite the opposite. However, the Government and BDUK seem to be taking a blanket, one-size-fits-all approach that will harm many rural communities in Eden in South Lakeland. A better solution, if we are to ensure that communities are connected comprehensively and at pace, would be to allow the large procurement under Project Gigabit to deliver alongside community schemes such as B4RN.

Sadly, B4RN is currently being managed out of the area, despite the transformative connections it has already achieved. Its track record is second to none. Communities including parts of Sedbergh, Kaber, Murton, Long Marton, Winton, Warcop, Ormside, Hilton, Hartley and Bleatarn are being forced to wait longer for their connection and will have poorer, less comprehensive coverage because the Government and BDUK are not following the more intelligent twin-track approach that would have allowed B4RN to provide some of the solutions.

We heard about telegraph poles, which are a significant issue. B4RN is a community-run organisation and it can build a fully underground network. It can do that because it is a voluntary organisation and landowners allow it on to their land to dig the trenches. I have been there myself. In Old Hutton, I was digging the trenches—not laying the cable; they would not allow me to do that. Getting dirty and digging holes is just about within my field of competence. However, those landowners will not allow access to their land for free to a commercial, multibillion-pound organisation. Consequently, there is the Fibrus operation and Project Gigabit, whereby large parts of the procurement would use telegraph poles. As Storm Arwen proved, telegraph poles are vulnerable to extreme weather events, which happen often in Cumbria. We are used to weather in the wild, and sadly, with climate change, we expect it to get worse and more intense.

In the interests of having greater resilience in the network, more and better access to broadband in every part of our rural county and supporting community groups that already know what they are doing, I ask the Minister and BDUK to re-examine their approach so that B4RN can meet the needs of communities that Project Gigabit will leave connected only partially or not at all. Rural communities often feel ignored and taken for granted by this Government. This is an opportunity for the Minister to listen and put that right.

3 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) on securing the debate and making such an impressive introductory speech. Indeed, I agree with all his points, so I will try to keep my remarks brief.

As with other Members—especially those who represent rural areas—the need for better broadband is something that fills my inbox almost weekly. As the hon. Member put it, broadband and digital connectivity have become the fourth utility, so it is no surprise that in my constituency, where 14% of premises can receive speeds of only up to 10 megabits per second, a lot of people are concerned about improving their digital connectivity, given the demands of education, businesses and leisure. Sadly, in Ceredigion the percentage of premises that cannot receive what Ofcom describes as decent broadband is 2.2%, compared with the UK figure of 0.2%.

As others have, I place on record my belief that there has been great progress in recent years in improving broadband infrastructure, in Ceredigion as well as in other parts of the United Kingdom, but there is more that we should do. As others have mentioned, the Government could make changes to the gigabit voucher scheme and Project Gigabit to accelerate progress. One concern among my constituents in communities that do not have decent broadband—certainly not gigabit broadband—is that they will have to wait several more years before any progress is made with their communities.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Knowing my hon. Friend's constituency, I am sure he will recognise the problem faced by the small community in Nantmor and Beddgelert in my constituency, where there is no mobile signal—an EE Home Office mast is in place, but it is not turned on—and a history of electricity outages, not over hours but over days. Analogue copper lines were switched off earlier this year, and the community is now awaiting a decision on whether the exchange will be eligible for a fibre community partnership. This is a real challenge—a real crisis—for many of our communities, and they have nowhere else to turn.

Ben Lake: I thank my right hon. Friend for that important point. In the 21st century, it is rather strange to stand here and talk about communities in the United Kingdom that are completely cut off from the outside world, especially during severe weather events. She mentioned a community around Beddgelert. I also have communities, such as Cwmystwyth, that have been told that, as soon as the copper landline network is switched off, they will have to depend on a broadband connection. Sadly, Cwmystwyth does not have one, and it does not have mobile signal, so it is left without any form of communication in the event of a storm.

As has been pointed out already, adequate and improved broadband infrastructure in rural areas can make a significant contribution to the community in not just a social but an economic sense. This afternoon, I received an email from a constituent who explained that she works for a company—a charity, as it happens—that is based and does work across the UK. She very much wants to stay in Ceredigion to continue that work, but she depends on a decent broadband connection. Sadly, where she lives is unlikely to receive an upgrade any time soon.

The last census showed that the population of Ceredigion constituency had dropped by 5.9%. We will not get into the technical detail of why that happened, but we know from covid in particular that a number of people who were doing hybrid working decided to relocate to Ceredigion. So rolling out good connectivity across the county would make a massive demographic contribution. It is probably worth emphasising that it would also make a contribution to the delivery of public services, getting staff into our schools, care homes and other important public services, which is something we already struggle with.

One thing I would like to emphasise is the good work that the Government have done to date on the gigabit voucher scheme. Ceredigion is very fortunate in being one of the pilot areas. I have tried to gauge the demand from communities to sign up to the vouchers, and I am pleased to say that communities in Ceredigion responded

very positively—I believe it is one of the best areas in terms of the number of declarations of interest. Since then, community co-ordinators have gone to considerable effort to ensure that communities are aware of the different options and that they register their interest and their vouchers, and some communities have succeeded. Some communities in Ceredigion have had their broadband connections improved considerably, and it has made a fantastic difference.

However, as the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) mentioned, others have found themselves caught in a bit of a limbo in recent months, because the voucher funding does not seem to be forthcoming from BDUK. It is possible that that has to do with work the Government are doing with Project Gigabit in mapping out the intervention areas, and I would be grateful if the Minister could clarify that.

Nevertheless, some of the community co-ordinators and those participating in the schemes are growing restless. In Wales, they have seen the best part of a decade of promises of improved connectivity that have come to nothing, so it is inevitable that people start to question whether the schemes will actually work for them. I fear that a lot of the demand and interest will dissipate the longer we go without any real progress. Will the Minister clarify whether the Government intend to accelerate some of the voucher schemes in the interim as we wait for the Project Gigabit areas to take off? It strikes me that, where community areas have engaged with each other, organised and registered an interest, we might as well get on with connecting them. Even if that means that it is only a couple of hundred or 1,000 premises in Ceredigion, it is better than nothing.

That brings me to Project Gigabit and the intervention areas. Although I very much welcome the fact that the Government are investing so much money in that endeavour, I have a concern about part of Ceredigion—sadly, we have been split in two in this process; the north is in a type C procurement contract, and it remains to be seen what the south-west Wales lot will look like. The point I want to raise with the Minister and seek his assurances on is that we will not drag our feet in making a decision, as opposed to the south-west Wales lot. I have already heard rumours that a decision might not be made until summer 2024. I am told by industry officials that, once contracts have been awarded, there will be a good six months of scoping, surveys and all the preparatory work and that, depending on where people are, it could then be two or three years before the connection is sorted. That concerns me because many of these communities will be in rural areas that do not have a mobile signal. They have no alternative methods of connectivity, and that is holding them back.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) mentioned, many of the hardest-to-reach properties lack any other form of communication. There needs to be greater co-ordination and prioritisation of the effort to connect the hardest-to-reach areas. By co-ordination I mean that we should think about the areas that lack a mobile signal, full fibre or broadband of any description and ensure that the digital switchover of landlines is paused. I know that that will entail work with BT and Ofcom, but that co-ordination is essential if we are to ensure that communities are not cut off.

[Ben Lake]

In terms of prioritisation, I can foresee a situation with the Project Gigabit and intervention area approach whereby residents who currently enjoy superfast broadband download speeds of 17 megabits per second will be connected to full gigabit, which is great—fantastic. At the same time, constituents who currently lack any broadband whatever will still be left waiting. Will the Minister assure me that there will be some prioritisation and that premises that currently receive decent broadband are perhaps second in line to those that lack anything at all?

3.9 pm

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Broadband can no longer be regarded as a luxury and simply an add-on for those who want it. It has become an integral and essential facility for modern-day living. People are now expected to be able to join a meeting online or carry out a transaction online. Transactions with Government Departments and banks, and for paying bills or booking appointments, are increasingly easier to carry out online, but only if we have access to decent broadband.

The alternatives are becoming increasingly difficult, as anyone who has spent hours queuing on a phone call will know—a situation further compounded by the closure of face-to-face facilities in rural banks, post offices and shops, for example. There are often economic incentives for people to go online, as they will be charged less. For anyone trying to run a farm or business in a rural area, access to high-quality broadband is essential to complete all the necessary paperwork, record keeping, communication and transactions.

Broadband is an essential part of levelling up and offering people living in rural areas a broader range of opportunities, for example in education. It can be difficult for a small rural school or college to offer subjects that are less in demand, such as modern foreign languages or music. The use of online classrooms can ensure that students can access a wider range of subjects.

In the past, we might have seen people who were well established in their business or profession coming to live in or returning to rural areas, but now people can start out online, setting up a small business or working remotely. All of that can happen only if they have access to high-quality broadband. In rural areas, particularly those that are more difficult to farm, we often bemoan the outward migration of our young people and worry that no one will be left to run the farm and take care of the countryside, but the truth is that to make a reasonable living, farming families often have to diversify. Without good broadband, their options are limited. How can they run a business or advertise a tourist facility competitively without good broadband?

Broadband is clearly a responsibility for the UK Government, working with the telecommunications industry and Ofcom. It should be a top priority for the Government, because for a relatively small investment it can contribute so much to levelling up and bringing opportunities to our rural areas, where they can be so limited. It matters more to have good broadband in rural areas, as there are fewer face-to-face opportunities than in urban areas, and transport costs are very high. Yes, it does cost more when there is difficult geography and there are not the economies of scale that there are in areas where large numbers of users are concentrated in one place.

It is like the Royal Mail's universal service delivery or the electricity supply: it should reach everyone. We should accept the principle of cross-subsidy, so that areas where it is more economic to roll out can subsidise those areas where it is more expensive. We should not say that it costs too much in rural areas so we will leave them until last or leave them out altogether. Let us make no mistake about this. I have heard providers who have received Government money to roll out broadband say that they have concentrated on the easy-to-supply areas.

Broadband is not devolved in Wales, but, seeing the desperate need for improved broadband, the Welsh Government have invested in broadband, more than doubling the availability of fast broadband across Wales through the Superfast Cymru programme and repeatedly stepping in to improve digital connectivity, using funding from the EU and other sources. The Welsh Government have, in the past, provided additional funding for the gigabit voucher scheme, but year-on-year budget cuts have meant that since March 2022 they have no longer been able to.

In August last year, the Senedd's Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee warned that people in Wales are being left behind, with sub-par, unreliable broadband that risks excluding people from modern life, and with rural areas being particularly affected. The UK Government's Project Gigabit is supposed to address that, but Wales's mountainous terrain is challenging. The worry is that UK funding does not reflect the real cost of roll-out in those areas.

When Labour was in power at UK level, the Labour Government delivered infrastructure competition in first-generation broadband, but since the Conservatives came to power, broadband and 5G roll-out seem to have been woefully slow. The Government have repeatedly rolled back on their commitment to broadband roll-out. Originally, we were promised full fibre for all by 2025. That has now been downgraded to a commitment to at least 85% of UK premises having access to gigabit broadband by 2025. We can be sure that the remaining 15% will include many rural areas.

The Government are saying that it will be 2030 before there will be nationwide—that is, 99%-plus—coverage. That is another seven years. How many businesses will have gone bust and how many young people will have left rural Wales in that time? Will the Minister confirm whether the Government are on track to reach 85% of UK premises with gigabit broadband by 2025 and whether that will include 85% of residents in Wales? Rather than just saying "99% by 2030", will the Minister be negotiating interim targets from 2025 to 2030, and will he ensure that the interim targets are fairly spread across the UK so that Wales keeps up percentage-wise with the rest? On that note, I conclude my remarks.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): I call Jonathan Edwards.

3.15 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Diolch, Sir Christopher; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I apologise for not giving you advance warning of my wish to speak, but I am glad to have caught your eye.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) on securing this debate and on his informative comments. He makes impressive contributions in this place and is always a pleasure to listen to. On a personal note, I congratulate him on his recent marriage. I was delighted to hear the news through the wonderful world of Facebook during the summer recess. I also welcome the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) back to the Labour Front Bench with responsibility for these matters.

I want briefly to raise two points. The first is good news about the success in increasing the roll-out of full-fibre coverage across the UK, Wales and, indeed, Carmarthenshire. I understand that about half of all homes in Carmarthenshire now have the potential to access full fibre. However, the issue is that take-up is not particularly good. Around 30% of homes that could receive full fibre are still on superfast. I put my hand up; I am one of those people, in Penygroes in the Gwendraeth valley. I wonder whether there is a push by the UK Government to encourage take-up. Is that a matter for the UK Government, for Openreach as the company with the infrastructure, or for the service providers? What can be done to increase uptake? Otherwise, it is a huge waste of investment and public funds.

The point I really want to make, however, is one that has been raised in my constituency following the collapse of Broadway Partners. Two communities in my constituency were endeavouring to get Broadway projects completed, but they were not completed in either case. The company has gone into administration. I think it is the first time an alternative provider has gone into administration, so it is a test case for us all. People on the ground and co-ordinators working with the company put in a huge amount of effort on these projects, and there is a huge risk of all their work going down the drain. Obviously that is demotivating for everybody involved. They are quite rightly asking me, as their Member of Parliament, what is happening and what can be done to resolve the situation.

From my discussions with the administrators, I was under the impression that the aim was to complete the process by the beginning of August, but my understanding is that it has yet to be completed. We obviously want to see the business sold as a going concern; that would probably be the easiest way for the situation to develop, but I have heard no news officially about whether it is likely. I wonder whether the Minister has had any discussions with BDUK or the administrators and whether he can inform us what is happening with the administration process.

The primary concern of the co-ordinators in my constituency is about what is happening to the vouchers that they were hoping to mobilise. Are they under the ownership of Broadway and therefore part of the administration process, or are they still under the ownership of BDUK? My understanding—I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed this one way or the other—is that the vouchers are not utilised until the broadband provision goes live. That should mean that they are with BDUK, which might offer some reassurance to my constituents.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) mentioned that he has a similar problem in his constituency. What really concerns everybody is that if the business is not sold as a going concern one way or another, the properties will fall into the new super-bid that has been created for

our part of the world. As the hon. Member outlined, that is not likely to be signed off until the spring, and it could then take two or three years to be delivered. That means that people who were on the verge of finally getting broadband in very rural parts of west Wales are now facing a potential wait of many years.

There is a potential solution: satellite and mobile technology. The big issue with satellite technology is that the costs are prohibitive—not only the capital costs of the infrastructure, but the revenue costs. The monthly cost of satellite packages is far more expensive than conventional broadband packages. Constituents have asked me why the UK Government do not come up with a scheme for the cohort of people who are on the verge of achieving broadband via Broadway, which has a scheme that offsets the extra costs that they would face if they went down the satellite road. That would enable them to achieve far better internet provision very quickly, rather than—as we may well fear—facing a wait of many years.

3.20 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I congratulate my friend and colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith), on securing the debate.

One of the first areas of improvement that I identified for my constituency of Inverclyde when I was first elected in 2015 was broadband speed and resilience. Today, after many discussions, the occasional confrontation and a lot of repetition, Inverclyde is well served. We now enjoy an average download speed of 133.4 megabits per second, with 96.7% superfast availability, and 85.7% are receiving over 30 megabits per second. Although these numbers are among the best in the UK, I acknowledge that that is not the experience of everyone in Inverclyde. If you are my constituent, and you are one of those that are still not getting a suitable service, I accept that you will be frustrated and angered by the service you are getting. Believe me when I say that I am working on it.

It is important that I do. We live in an instant society, in which we have become used to instant access to entertainment, data, food, travel and a litany of things that were once planned for, looked forward to and experienced at our leisure. We now consume at the quickest possible rate, and the thought of having to wait is deemed unacceptable. I may sound like some curmudgeon, but in truth I am as frustrated as everyone else.

During my 35 years of working in IT, I saw a lot of change. The industry was gearing up when I first joined it, and it was moving at a much faster rate when I left. It now operates at breakneck speed. Changes to technology are being developed and implemented at a far greater rate of knots than we have ever experienced before. The speeds and volumes of data that we accept as normal were once a thing of dreams. We used to squeeze out every last bit of processing power, and then technology ran ahead of us and became cheaper, physically smaller and far more capable. But we were limited by our own imagination regarding what we were going to do with all these new telecoms capabilities. Initially, it was focused on industry and the work environment, and then there was the advent of desktop computers, laptops, iPods, gaming, the internet and online shopping.

[Ronnie Cowan]

The marketplace for digital inclusion and the requirements therein changed. Back in the day, Governments counted the number of households with clean water, as that was seen as a duty and a right. It was deemed important that not just the rich had access. Clean drinking water was required to eradicate cholera and the wider society benefited. The mission was clear, and the fundamentals have not really changed. Electricity and gas connections over time became more the norm than the exception, but where the vast majority of people enjoyed reliable access, the more rural areas were left behind and had to become more self-reliant regarding clean water and energy. That remains true to this day, and it now includes broadband.

We cannot allow that to continue. The legislation has to take into consideration the provision for areas that are harder to reach and not economically viable. Currently, the UK Government have estimated that 0.3% of properties are too expensive to reach. I accept that running a fibre cable to some very rural areas is not the solution, but alternatives exist and funding them must be considered. Simply saying it is too hard or too expensive is not good enough.

When it comes to future-proofing the infrastructure, we must acknowledge that we will never consume less than we currently use. The demand will continue to grow, and the shape and form of our engagement with it will change. The more bandwidth we create, the more uses we will find for it. It is clear that we need to be ambitious beyond our current or even projected requirements. Just as we now expect water, sewerage and power, we must add connectivity to that list.

I caution my fellow Members and those running Project Gigabit and the R100 scheme in Scotland that at some point we will require 1 terabyte per second. That is 1,024 gigabytes. I cannot say at present what for, but with quantum computing and the human imagination, I am sure that some day somebody will, and we must be designing and building the digital infrastructure that supports that growth. It is the responsibility of UK Government to manage, fund and co-ordinate the solution. Otherwise, we shall be standing still while the demand accelerates over the horizon.

Finally, as always, as a Scottish nationalist I look at situations and ask myself, "Could Scotland do this better if it were independent?" When I look at the Faroe Islands, which have some of the best broadband in the world, along with Norway, I am inclined to think that we could do better if telecoms were a devolved area. Some day, as a normal independent nation, we shall get the opportunity to prove that. I just hope it is before we are measuring success in terabytes per second.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): I call the newly appointed shadow Minister.

3.26 pm

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Thank you, Sir Christopher. It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, though I merely point out that Sir Christophers are two a penny these days. You have said in the Chamber that I like the sound of my voice too much—I see the Minister is agreeing—so I will try to limit my remarks as much as I can.

It is a great delight to be here. I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) on his marriage and on securing the debate, not least because it matters to a much larger number of Members than are able to be here this afternoon. I think very fondly of Stirling. I was partly schooled in Stirling—well, the school was entirely in Stirling; whether I was fully schooled is another matter. I remember standing at the beheading stone, looking down over the Raploch and seeing some of the issues that I thought most needed addressing in the whole of British society.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about rural and semi-rural areas, because the category of semi-rural is complicated and difficult. In the Rhondda, which hon. Members are all very welcome to visit, it feels very congested, but it is semi-rural, because everybody lives within 1 mile of a farm—hence "How Green Was My Valley" and all the rest of it. That provides real difficulties, as do the valleys' contours, for mobile telephony and broadband connectivity. The hon. Gentleman rightly made the point that often this is far too complicated. It is not just complex; it has been complicated by lots of different players in the market not being able to work together.

It was great to hear from the hon. Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond), who is the sole English Conservative MP here today. I know that she is a very fine swimmer, because she swam in the parliamentary swimming team with me. She was right to raise not only the issue of GP appointments—when we can get them at all—but that of banks closing. When Lloyds closes in Tonypandy next year, there will not be a single bank in the Rhondda. That is a major problem for lots of businesses and lots of individuals. Sometimes it is necessary to go to a bank physically, and at the moment that means effectively going to Cardiff, which could be a very long bus ride from many areas, if there is ever a bus to get on. She makes a good point. She also referred to the points that Age UK has made about the problems for older citizens. I think she mentioned the over-60s. Since I am in that category, I was a bit troubled, but maybe I misheard because I do not have my hearing aids in.

It was great to hear from my very friendly hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy). I knew all about the white telephone boxes, although if there is a telephone box left anywhere it is a miracle these days. She is right about the lack of competition, and sometimes when competition arrives there is so little co-ordination that people end up with roads being dug up endlessly all over the place. People ask, "Well, couldn't somebody have just spoken to someone before they started digging it up again?" The roads end up looking like a bizarre patchwork. We have exactly the same problem with the Rhondda—Members will have noticed that this is all about the Rhondda—being dug up, and Rhondda Cynon Taf Council is tearing its hair out. The moment it has done a road and resurfaced it, suddenly some broadband operator wants to dig it up all over again.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) talked about weather in the wild—we certainly know all about that—and the need for greater resilience. Often people who make decisions for cities simply do not understand the kind of issues that might be faced in a rural or semi-rural area. In valley communities,

what happens on the top of the mountain ends up affecting everybody at the bottom of the valley pretty quickly.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake)—it is great that this debate has been so Welsh-heavy; there has been a great deal of Welsh hwyl, and if we put this much effort into the World cup, I am sure we will triumph—is right about hybrid working and the fact that many people are now choosing to work in a different way. Many of the communities we are talking about are ideal for hybrid working, because the quality of life—leaving out the issue of broadband—is superb. We should want to re-energise those communities. We would be adding genuine value. The hon. Gentleman is also right about the public sector and the need for co-ordination. A large number of public services now rely completely on constituents being able to access broadband. If someone sets up a business and gets to the £85,000 threshold for VAT, they have to submit a digital return, and the aim is to get to that system for all of taxation. Encouraging people to set up new businesses is not very effective if they have to sit there and watch a page buffer for an hour and a half.

My hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) also spoke of paperwork, and she is right to say that farmers need good broadband. Very few farms, especially hill farms and farms in these kinds of areas, are able to survive unless they diversify in some shape or form. They could diversify into what they call in Italy an agriturismo business, and we maybe need a defined category for that with the proper support, but without broadband it would be very difficult for farmers to do that, let alone access and submit all the required forms. My hon. Friend was also right about interim targets, and I hope the Minister will respond to that point.

The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards)—we have not yet finished with Wales—is absolutely right to say that it is shocking that in significant areas in the country the sign-off looks like it will not be happening until 2024. Given that every time there has been a target, it has not been met, it may well not happen until the second or third quarter of 2024. That would mean that people would not get a decent rate of broadband service until 2027 or even 2028.

I used to work at the BBC many years ago. I did not exactly write “BBC Beyond 2000”, where we talked about a digicopoeia—someone else drafted it, and I rewrote it in English—but we have been talking about this for a very long time, and we still have not got there. Sometimes it is embarrassing to go to other countries, elsewhere in Europe or around the world, and find that the connectivity is swifter, better and easier than here in the UK.

Lots of hon. Members have made the point that broadband—and telephony as well; I make that point because Porth, where I live, has the worst telephony connection I know of in the country—is a vital service. It is vital for schools and the NHS. Whoever thought that they would have their MRI scan taken by somebody in a hospital in one part of the country and have it read by somebody else who is not necessarily even in the UK, as it might be read at a different time of night. That all relies on very serious broadband availability. The issue of banks has already been raised. I would also argue that if we are going to have serious public sector reform, and if we are to be able to use the advantages that might

come from AI, we need significant broadband speeds as well. It is as vital as water, electricity and gas, as many hon. Members have said.

That is why it is depressing that Boris Johnson—I think we are still allowed to refer to him—said in 2019 that the target for full fibre to all was 2025. The target now is just that 85% of premises will have access to gigabit-capable broadband by 2025. That is 15% not getting anywhere near those speeds, while a significant number of other people will be relying on part cable and part fibre. That is nowhere near the target set just in 2019, at the beginning of this Parliament. In fact, as of January, only 72% of UK premises had a gigabit-capable broadband connection.

The situation in rural areas, as everybody has mentioned, is still very slow, and progress is slow too. Project Gigabit had money allocated for it in 2020, but no regional contract was awarded until last November—that is two and a half years wasted—and £3.8 billion, or roughly 75% of it, is still to be allocated. That is shocking, because it is about large chunks of our constituencies, and many other constituencies in the land, not having access to what we have all deemed to be a basic necessity. My first question to the Minister is, therefore, when will it all be allocated? Does he have a specific timetable? He is looking very inscrutable—he is doing his best inscrutable look now, which is his favourite look.

The private sector is responsible for 80% of those who are not classed as hard-to-reach, but many of whom have significant difficulties, negotiating wayleaves for instance. I thought that the regulations had been changed to make that easier, but that is notwithstanding the issues that one then has of lots of different people competing to place their cables in the same place. There are also difficulties for the private sector around accessing multi-dwelling units, and the private sector complains—already has complained; one of the first emails I had just today was about this—about chronic skilled-worker shortages.

I have a few questions for the Minister. First, what new barrier-busting mechanisms is the Department looking to introduce to help ease some of those problems? Could he provide an update on when flexi-permits will finally become available? Secondly, what work is the Department doing to foster a skilled telecoms workforce within the UK? Is there an update on whether telecoms engineers might be added to the shortage occupation list to ease the process of overseas recruitment? Thirdly, it is absolutely crucial to the roll-out that there is healthy competition within the industry. What is the Department doing to ensure that that competition is lively?

I have one other area that I will briefly speak about, which is affordability. I am very conscious, representing one of the poorest constituencies in the land, that if someone has to find £26 a month for a bill that, 15 or 20 years ago, they did not even think of as part of the utilities, that is a significant additional cost. I suspect that is why 4.3% of people in the Rhonda still receive less than 10 megabits per second—that is double the Welsh average but less than the United Kingdom’s—while our download speed is just 52.5 megabits per second, as opposed to 111.6 for the UK. That means that nearly all of the Rhonda—all of the wards—is in the worst 10% in the UK, and a lot of that is about affordability.

[*Sir Chris Bryant*]

Citizens Advice have said that one million people have cancelled their broadband this year because of the cost of living crisis. That is an additional worry. Digital poverty, is, of course, a vicious circle. If someone has lost their job, they need to go online to search for jobs, or they might want to use the internet to be able to start up a new business, so it can become a vicious circle as someone becomes more and more isolated. That is why we believe that it is really important to introduce a proper affordability policy, which the Labour party intends to introduce if it enters government.

Our plan is to help prevent families being hit with a bombshell of broadband prices. First, we will reverse changes made by the Government in 2019 that allowed regulated wholesale prices to rise with inflation rather than costs. That will ensure that wholesalers and internet service providers do not get a windfall from sky-high inflation while families and firms struggle to pay their bills. Secondly, we will prompt Ofcom to investigate and take action to strengthen consumer protections, including taking action on mid-contract price rises, early termination costs for social tariff customers and loyalty penalties where long-term customers pay more than new customers.

Finally, we will ensure that there is an industry-wide social tariff for low-income families. Individual providers are already offering discounted packages, but Ofcom and Which? have branded them the “best-kept secret” in broadband. Labour will ensure that that secret comes to an end, prompting industry to work with Ofcom and consumer groups to develop a mandatory and well-advertised broadband social tariff for low-income families and promising to set and legislate for one in Government if they do not.

3.41 pm

The Minister for Data and Digital Infrastructure (Sir John Whittingdale): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) for obtaining the debate and setting the subject out in an extremely constructive fashion, which I think has been maintained throughout. I welcome the contributions from all Members present. As has been observed, we have been on a tour of the nations of the United Kingdom, although I must say that I miss the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who would normally be with us. As a result, we have not heard the voice of Northern Ireland, but we have covered the rest of the UK comprehensively.

A number of points were made in detail about the situation in the constituencies of hon. Members, and as much as I can I will respond to some of the points raised. I will make a few general comments to begin. I add my own congratulations to the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) on his recent wedding, and indeed to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant)—although I am not quite sure that it is the same degree of congratulation—on shadowing me on the Opposition Front Bench. Nevertheless, my congratulations to him on his promotion.

As has been said throughout this debate, and as is certainly recognised by the Government, broadband is now an essential part of life. It will go on being so as more and more services are provided online. That does

not mean to say that we must neglect those who do not have access—that still remains important. I will say a word about digital exclusion, which was mentioned, but broadband is an essential. The Government have set ambitious targets, and I agree with the observation of the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) that the appetite for broadband speed will go on increasing. That is why the Government shifted from originally having a target of superfast roll-out, which is relatively modest compared with the gigabit ambition of 1,000 megabits per second. That is about futureproofing. It is about ensuring that as more and more technologies and services become available, the connection is already in place to allow people to take advantage of it and for the economy to grow as a result.

Project Gigabit, which has been the main focus of this debate, is a £5 billion investment to support nationwide gigabit-capable broadband. As has been mentioned, we have set a target of 85% coverage by 2025 and nationwide coverage by 2030. In response to the requests made by the hon. Members for Rhondda and for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) for targets, we have set those two targets, but BDUK will respond in due course to the Public Accounts Committee in setting out a delivery programme, so there will be more detail on how we get there and how progress will be made. We have already made astonishing progress. Consider that in January 2019, gigabit coverage was 6%, and now—four years later—it is at 77%. That is an astonishing achievement. However, in a sense, the more we are successful in extending coverage, first, the more vocal are the complaints from the people who do not have it, which is perfectly understandable—

Liz Saville Roberts: Will the Minister provide further advice on the process of approving a pre-registered package request under the gigabit broadband voucher scheme? My understanding is that there is an element of uncertainty about that.

Sir John Whittingdale: I will come on to say a word about the gigabit broadband voucher scheme. To some extent, the Project Gigabit procurements have taken over from it, but if the right hon. Lady has a specific question, perhaps she would let me have the details, and I will be happy to supply an answer.

As I said, the main thrust of achieving the extension of coverage has been through the commercial roll-out, which has resulted from the competition that we have encouraged. Over 100 providers are now investing over £40 billion to roll out gigabit-capable broadband. We continue to believe that an active, competitive market—I will say a word about Broadway in a second—delivers the best results for consumers.

There will always be areas of the country where commercial roll-out is not viable, and it is in the first instance to address those elements that Project Gigabit was established. It includes local procurements, regional and cross-regional procurements, and the gigabit broadband voucher scheme. A large number of companies are now involved, and we are signing procurement contracts regularly. We have so far awarded 12 Project Gigabit contracts to improve digital connectivity in Cornwall, Cumbria, Norfolk, Suffolk, Hampshire and Northumberland, and we have a further 24 local and regional procurements under way. I was delighted a few

weeks ago to visit Orford in Suffolk, where £100 million is being spent under Project Gigabit to extend coverage to another 80,000 premises. In Norfolk, £114 million is being spent to extend coverage to 62,000 premises. That is being mirrored across the country. As I said earlier, however, we are conscious that that will still leave some people outside the scope of those procurement packages, and they will obviously continue to press for coverage to be extended to them. As we extend coverage, the remaining premises will be, almost by definition, in harder-to-reach areas, so reaching them may require more innovative and inventive solutions, but the 100% target is a real target and we are confident that it can be achieved.

I want to say a little about Scotland, because the debate was obtained by the hon. Member for Stirling. As he will know, 71% of premises in Scotland can now access a gigabit connection, and 96% can access a superfast connection of 30 megabits per second. I am pleased to tell him that 93% of premises in his constituency now have access to superfast speeds, and 56% can access a gigabit-capable connection, which I think is a little higher than the figure that he quoted from the House of Commons Library. The figure I have been given is 56%, which I hope is correct and perhaps a little more up to date—demonstrating that we are extending the degree of coverage by the day. Considering that in January 2019 the figure for his constituency was 1%, I hope he will recognise that that is a significant achievement.

We are working closely with the Scottish Government on the issue. I recently had a call with Scottish Government Minister Richard Lochhead to discuss the programme being conducted by the Scottish Government through the R100 initiative. R100 was perhaps ambitious, in that it set a target of 100% coverage by 2021. Obviously, that has not been achieved and some procurements still have to take place, but we are anxious to work along with the Scottish Government and the testing of the market for those procurement contracts is now under way. Stirling has also benefited from the gigabit voucher scheme, with 120,000 vouchers issued so far under the scheme and its previous iterations.

Emma Hardy: Before the Minister's speech concludes, will he address the specific problems we are facing in Hull? Can I push him again to agree to meet me and the other local MPs to discuss these issues in more detail, so that we can hopefully find a way to get Ofcom to take this problem more seriously?

Sir John Whittingdale: I will come to the particular points that the hon. Lady raised and, indeed, points raised by other Members during the debate, so I am not trying to duck those at all.

Wales has featured strongly in the debate. As hon. Members from Wales will know, we are launching a cross-regional procurement, covering north-west Wales, mid-Wales and south-east Wales, and are looking to have a further procurement next summer for south-west Wales, and I will say a little bit more about that.

I turn to some of the specific contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) has been extremely persistent in making the case for her constituency. She will be aware—indeed, she referred to the fact—that a contract worth £104 million has been made with CityFibre, which will benefit around 76,000

premises in Hampshire, a number of which will be in the Meon Valley. I know she wants a date for when that will be achieved, but we have signed that contract, and I will ensure that BDUK continues to keep her updated with any progress. The signing of the contract is good news and hopefully her constituents will be able to benefit very soon.

My hon. Friend mentioned digital exclusion. As I said, I absolutely share her recognition of the importance of ensuring that people who may struggle to take advantage of digital technology are able to do so. We work with the Department for Education to ensure that essential digital skills for adults are made available through a number of different programmes and with the Department for Work and Pensions in supporting claimants with digital skills. She is absolutely right to press us on that point, and I will continue to keep in close touch with my colleagues in Government about that.

On the specific issue that the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) raised, competition is absolutely at the heart of the Government's approach. We believe that it delivers for consumers, but I understand the frustration that she expresses. It is clearly not the intention that there should be three separate telegraph poles and cables alongside them, and we are conscious that the installation of such infrastructure is disruptive to people.

We have made it easier for operators to install equipment, but it is not the case that local communities no longer have any say. While individuals cannot impose conditions, local authorities can. They have to be notified of the intention to deploy infrastructure, and they can set conditions under which the operator has to comply when carrying out an installation. If those conditions are not complied with, the local authority needs to notify Ofcom, and Ofcom has the power to intervene. When it comes to the hon. Lady's case in Hull, if operators are not abiding by the code of practice or the conditions that have been set, that is a matter that I would encourage her local authority or, indeed, the hon. Lady herself to take up with Ofcom because there are powers available.

Emma Hardy: Any conditions that are set do not appear to be mandatory—that is my understanding. This is the situation from both Hull City Council and East Riding of Yorkshire Council; my constituency covers both.

On the issue of Ofcom, I have to say that I have not found it at all effective in this area and I do not believe it is carrying out its full duties as a regulator in taking this matter seriously and taking action. I would welcome the Government getting behind this call to say to Ofcom that it needs to act and take the issue more seriously. I am so pleased that the Minister has agreed that it is simply unacceptable to have three different companies digging up the same street in the space of a year, putting their own poles in.

Sir John Whittingdale: Ofcom has powers to intervene if conditions are not being properly complied with. If the hon. Lady is dissatisfied with Ofcom's response, I encourage her to contact them directly and come back to me, by all means, if she finds Ofcom is not responding in the way she would like.

[Sir John Whittingdale]

As for the cases raised by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), we are very much aware of the situation regarding the B4RN offer but, as he will be aware, BDUK has just signed the Project Gigabit contract in Cumbria, which is worth £180 million. It will extend coverage to 59,000 more premises in Cumbria and 10,000 of those are in his constituency. That is a significant increase. Obviously, there will still be some still outside that, and I hear what he says about the B4RN offer. However, an agreement was never reached with B4RN over its proposals. We will continue to talk to the hon. Gentleman about any concerns and I share his wish to ensure that the premises outside the procurement contract that has been signed still have the prospect in due course of accessing Gigabit. I invite the hon. Gentleman to continue to talk to the Department and to Fibribus about that.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion rightly raised the procurement contract for south-west Wales and pressed us to not drag our feet—I think that was the expression he used. We have no intention of doing that, but BDUK will let him know as soon as a successful supplier has been identified and will ensure that he is kept up to date. He also raised an important point about the public switched telephone network. I can assure him that nobody will have their existing connection cut off if they do not have access to broadband. I am very conscious of that.

The hon. Member for Llanelli made the point, which I think I have already covered, about setting out a timetable and targets. I agreed with a lot of what she said about the importance of ensuring that there is universal coverage and about the indispensability of broadband.

I want to come back on the point about affordability, which I am glad the hon. Member for Rhondda raised because it is important. We recognise that for some

people broadband is an essential of life but nevertheless a significant cost to their budget. That is why we have been keen to get the agreement of all the operators to put in place social tariffs, which are now available for 99% of consumers. The challenge has been that take-up has not been anything like what we would like to see, with something like 200,000 out of a possible 4 million consumers taking advantage of social tariffs. I had a meeting this morning with colleagues at the Department for Work and Pensions to discuss how we could ensure that all consumers are aware. We are also talking to the operators about ensuring they publicise it as well. All I can say to those on low incomes who are worried about the cost is that they do not need to wait for a Labour Government, if one should ever appear, because this Government are taking the issue up and tackling it now.

Thank you for the opportunity, Sir Christopher, and I thank the hon. Member for Stirling. It has been a very valuable debate.

3.59 pm

Alyn Smith: I am conscious of time so I will not mention anyone individually, but I thank all hon. Members for their contributions and also for their kind words personally. I am not against all unions; I am in favour of some of them—one being my wedding earlier in the summer. I should also mention that the Stirling beheading stone is a historic item; it is not actually used for that practice anymore, although I suspect it might be if I do not deliver better broadband for a lot of my constituents.

I am grateful for the Minister's comments. I will follow up, if I may. I was particularly struck at the progress made in Stirling. We may have slightly different numbers, but from 1% in 2019, the year of my election, to the progress that we have now—

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. I am afraid we have to move on to the next debate.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Water Resources Management Plan: Teddington

4 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered water resources plan proposals for Teddington.

It is a pleasure, Sir Christopher, to serve under your chairmanship and to lead this important debate on Thames Water's hugely controversial plans for a water recycling scheme at Teddington in my constituency.

I am very glad to see the Minister in her place. She will know that my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) and I have repeatedly asked her, for many months now, for a meeting to discuss this scheme. Given that Thames Water's newly revised plans have just hit the Secretary of State's desk for approval, this debate could not have been granted at a more critical time.

Although I have a number of questions to put to the Minister, my overarching request is very simple. On behalf of the residents of Teddington, Twickenham, St Margarets and beyond, I ask Ministers to veto the Teddington water recycling proposals now, before yet more money is wasted on a project that is bad for the environment and bad for water bill payers, as well as barely scratching the surface of the problem it seeks to resolve.

It is no secret that our water system is under pressure. Both population growth and climate change are challenges that must be overcome, so I recognise and welcome the work that Thames Water has undertaken to prepare for future water shortages. However, because of the limited capacity and the potentially disastrous impact on water quality and the environment, our community believes that Thames Water has taken a damaging wrong turn in promoting a water recycling scheme at Teddington.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member, who is my constituency neighbour, for securing this debate. Does she agree that instead of yet another hugely expensive capital scheme—we still have Tideway, as well—it might be better if Thames Water focused on significantly reducing the leakage of fresh water from its pipes?

Munira Wilson: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady, my constituency neighbour, and I will make that very point in my speech.

However, I will just briefly set out what the proposal is. It is to abstract millions of litres of fresh water from the Thames in my constituency and transfer it across London to the Lea Valley reservoir during times of drought. To replace that fresh water, Thames Water plans to pump millions upon millions of litres of treated effluent from Mogden sewage treatment works into the river at Teddington. That is millions upon millions of litres of treated sewage being dumped every day—not just in times of drought, but every day—into a tranquil yet lively hotspot for fishing, boating, paddleboarding and even wild swimming.

If that was not enough, the scheme threatens to wreak havoc on the local environment before a single drop of treated sewage even enters the Thames. That is

because a new pipeline will have to be drilled underground from Isleworth to Ham, which means constructing eight access shafts. Each shaft will require a sizeable construction site, with conservation areas such as Ham Lands and recreation grounds such as Moormead Park being put at risk. Residents do not want their river harmed and they do not want to see their green spaces turned to rubble.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for securing this extremely important debate. She mentioned Ham Lands, which is in my constituency of Richmond Park. It is a local nature reserve that the local community has spent decades trying to protect. It has a unique ecology; it is home to many rare plants, lichen and fungi. Yet incredibly Thames Water proposes to build up to six major construction sites on Ham Lands, each one half the size of a football pitch. The plans include the permanent—I emphasise permanent—destruction of five acres of vital wildlife habitat. In total, 24,000 people have signed a petition against the scheme. Does she agree that the community has made its views very clear and that the Government must now listen?

Munira Wilson: I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for that important intervention; I could not agree with her more. Thames Water has conducted a consultation, but its response to its own consultation, published just a few days ago, makes it abundantly clear that it has not listened to public opinion or taken due regard of the impact on the very precious environment on which it is seeking to build.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend on not only securing this debate but how she has conducted her campaign on behalf of her constituents, working with our hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney).

Many of my constituents in Kingston are worried about the scheme. They treasure ecology and water quality, and are really alarmed that Thames Water could think it acceptable to pump highly treated recycled water back into our wonderful Thames. They are also worried about the impact of the construction—the huge number of lorry movements that will come into Kingston during the construction phase. My hon. Friend's campaign has my full support, and I would be grateful if she added my representations and those of my constituents to her own.

Munira Wilson: My right hon. Friend demonstrates, once again, the strength of opinion locally. Not only has Thames Water not listened to residents' representations but its interaction and communication since the start of the process have been, frankly, woeful.

Just days ago, Thames Water published its revised water resources management plan—supposedly, as I said, in response to its public consultation. As the Minister will know, in the plan the company has drastically improved its usage reduction target to 110 litres per person per day by 2050. That is a welcome step. That reduction in demand means less pressure on new supply options such as the Teddington water recycling scheme. Yet despite public opposition and the concerns of the Environment Agency, Thames Water have kept that in its plans while

[Munira Wilson]

scrapping more popular schemes that would have far more benefit to our economy and the environment. How can that be the right choice?

The strength of local feeling about the scheme is palpable, as my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park and my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) have pointed out—not just from local residents who live by the river, but from the thousands of river users who row, fish, swim or paddle in our part of the Thames. The Minister and Thames Water need only look at the sheer scale of the response to the public consultation. Across the whole of its catchment, Thames Water received 1,700 responses; well over a third of those referenced the Teddington scheme directly. Thames Water has chosen to ignore those, but I implore the Minister to listen.

When justifying this controversial scheme, Thames Water returned to a particular claim again and again: that Teddington is the best value option. Best value for whom? That is the question asked by many of my constituents, who remain unconvinced that answer is, as it should be, best value for our rivers, best value for the environment or best value for Thames Water's 15 million customers.

The truth is that we have reached a point where Thames Water is running out of time to get our water system into shape and it is dangerously close to missing its drought targets. The company's own documents refer to a "short-term planning problem" in London and it thinks it has found its quick fix in this water recycling scheme. But it is a sticking plaster. The scheme is necessary only because of decades of neglect and underinvestment by Thames Water. In the 34 years since it was established, it has delivered next to no new major water resources, aside from a multi-million-pound desalination plant that was completely out of action last year during the worst drought in decades—not a fantastic record, as I am sure the Minister will agree. That failure to plan ahead has left the company scrambling for a scheme that it can deliver in 10 years or less and it thinks it can plug the gap with water recycling.

The scheme would cost hundreds of millions of pounds of customers' money but gain very little in terms of resilience. The proposed scheme would save only one 10th—yes, only one 10th—of the 630 million litres of water that Thames Water loses every day through leaks, as the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) pointed out. Thames Water has failed to take prompt action on those leaks over recent years.

Residents regularly see leaks in their neighbourhoods. Last month, an entire playground in Hampton Wick in my constituency was flooded with drinking water. Thames Water is haemorrhaging not just water, but public trust. That is why residents want the company to focus on the leaks and on reducing demand.

Our stretch of the Thames is often called London's countryside for its picturesque setting, with lush natural habitats and thriving ecosystems supporting species, from bats and badgers to brown trout. Understandably, local residents are passionate about protecting it. Time and again, we have been told by Thames Water that, with tertiary treatment, the effluent that it pumps into the river at Teddington would be of the same quality as

the river water itself, with negligible impact on our vibrant river environment or on swimmers, boaters and other river users' safety.

If that were really the case, however, Thames Water would be able to transfer that highly treated effluent straight into its reservoirs, rather than into the Thames. The company has been clear that that is not an option, however. The truth is that Thames Water has made claims about the environmental impact of the scheme that it simply cannot back up, because it has not completed a full environmental assessment to say how the scheme will affect our river ecology, and nor has it completed human health impact assessments of how it might affect thousands of river users.

To quote the Environment Agency's response to the proposal, Thames Water has so far failed to show that the Teddington scheme is "feasible or environmentally acceptable". That is a pretty low baseline. In reality, treated sewage contains a number of chemicals beyond those that the Government have specific targets for, such as phosphorus. Treated effluent contains a host of compounds and chemicals that we have not been assured would be filtered out, including PFAS—so-called forever chemicals, which do not break down in the environment and are known to cause health complications in humans and wildlife—and pharmaceuticals. We should be working to reduce such chemicals in our rivers and streams, rather than wilfully pumping them in.

On top of that, local residents are understandably alarmed that constructing the scheme may mean tearing up beloved green spaces and areas of conservation interest to drill a new tunnel and to construct shafts. Moormead Park in St Margaret's is a popular local green space for families, local schools and sports groups, with a busy playground and planning permission having just been granted for a much-needed new community sports pavilion. Ham Lands is a beautiful nature reserve, home to important wildlife habitats, as my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park pointed out. The list of species that could be disturbed or displaced by construction is very long.

It is worth the Minister noting that none of the construction details was shared during Thames Water's information event earlier this year. It is not just Thames Water's sewage discharges that stink; its public engagement with our community does too. Engagement has been beyond woeful. Despite that, the public response to Thames Water's consultation was fantastic. If Thames Water had put any value on the 1,700 responses it received, we would not need to discuss this today.

The company has chosen to scrap its proposal for a new water transfer from the River Severn to the Thames, which would have allowed it potentially to restore large stretches of the beautiful Cotswold canals. Unlike Teddington, that scheme had huge public backing. The positive response to it in the consultation was overwhelming, with people citing the huge social, environmental and economic benefits of restoring those heritage waterways.

Thames Water has thrown public opinion out with the bathwater, a luxury afforded only to companies that have a monopoly in their industry. The company cites customer research to suggest that the public prefer dumping treated effluent into the Thames to restoring heritage canals. I do not know about you, Sir Christopher, but given the findings of the actual consultation, that seems to be a surprising result.

Before I wrap up, I want to touch briefly on two technical points made by local campaigners. The first is about the Environment Agency and Surrey County Council's River Thames scheme. Shockingly, at my first meeting with Thames Water representatives back in January, they did not even seem to know that that scheme existed, despite its clear impact on river flows at Teddington. Any proposals for water recycling at Teddington must be compatible with those vital works.

Secondly, residents have questions about capacity at the Queen Mary reservoir in London. They simply want to know what work Thames Water has done to investigate that option. Will the Minister add her voice to their calls to for a more sustainable solution?

A campaign group called Save Ham Lands and River is hosting an event in Ham in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park this Saturday to discuss the scheme and our concerns in more detail. If the Minister truly wants to hear what Thames Water customers think of the plan, there is no better opportunity to speak to local residents and river users. I hope that she will accept the invitation, but if not, my hon. Friend and I would be more than delighted to welcome her, at her earliest convenience, to Teddington and Ham to experience our bustling river community for herself. It will take her only half an hour on the tube from Westminster.

I hope that the Minister will respond to the concerns that I have highlighted. It is disappointing that she has ignored our calls for a meeting for many months. It has taken several letters, a point of order and now this debate to compel her to sit in a room with us to listen to constituents' concerns.

Residents in Teddington, Twickenham, St Margarets and across the region do not trust Thames Water, and they do not trust regulators and the Government to hold it to account. That is precisely why Liberal Democrats nationally are calling for wholesale reform of the water industry to transform private companies such as Thames Water into public-good corporations, with value for the customer and the environment written into their DNA. It is also why locally we are standing up for residents' concerns about the plan and calling on the Government to consider viable alternatives to the scheme, which will damage our river environment for little reward in terms of long-term resilience.

We urge the Minister and the Secretary of State to give the Teddington scheme and all Thames Water's infrastructure plans the full and proper scrutiny they deserve to ensure that they are best value for not only stakeholders, but customers who are paying their bills today and the environment that our children will inherit tomorrow. On scrutinising the proposal, they will find that it is deeply flawed and should be stopped in its tracks now.

To quote the Minister:

"Water is a precious resource."—[*Official Report*, 21 February 2023; Vol. 728, c. 133.]

We are asking the Government to show that that is not just a platitude, but at the heart of their policies. I ask the Minister to start by giving us a timeline for when the Secretary of State expects to make her decision, and by answering the various questions I have asked today.

What does she think of Thames Water's pursuing quick fixes instead of sustainable solutions, such as restoring the Cotswold canals? Does she think that it is acceptable that Thames Water has put forward water recycling without a full environmental impact assessment? What does she think of the risks of constructing the scheme and the fact that Thames Water did not make them clear to the community from the outset? Does she believe that pumping treated effluent into the river is viable, given the current levels of sewage pollution in our waterways? Will she take up the unanswered questions of residents about both the River Thames scheme and the Queen Mary reservoir in her discussions with Thames Water? Finally, can she look local residents and their children in the eye and tell them that the scheme is worth the consequences for our river, our precious local environment and our vibrant community of river user groups?

4.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): It is a pleasure, Sir Christopher, to have you in the Chair.

I thank the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for securing the debate and giving us the opportunity to discuss the subject and the whole issue of water supply that faces the country. I put on record an apology for the tardiness in replying to letters—I am trying to get to the bottom of exactly how that happened.

The hon. Member knows—we all know—that water is a precious and vital resource. It is needed for everything we do. It is essential for a healthy environment and a prosperous economy, but a reliable water supply is often taken for granted, as I have been discovering more and more since becoming water Minister. We have not experienced country-wide water shortages since the 1970s, although there were some significant strains on water supply in large parts of the country last year. There was drought, with that record heat and dry weather.

Climate change and a growing population, especially in the drier parts of the country, are causing real challenges for our water supply. I was glad that the hon. Member at least recognised that the system is under pressure. Water companies must take those factors into account when they plan in order to provide a reliable supply of safe drinking water, and water for all the other uses we require. It is our job as a Government to work with the water regulators to ensure that water companies do that effectively.

[*MR VIRENDRA SHARMA in the Chair*]

The Government's plan for water identified that by 2050 about 4 billion extra litres of water a day will be needed. That is a quarter as much water as we use now. That is a significant amount and it will be achieved in many ways, which I will outline. We have a detailed plan as to how that will happen. We have to take a strategic approach to planning future water needs, work with regional water resources groups and water companies to meet the challenges of climate change, and at the same time protect and enhance the environment. I totally agree that we must not do it at the expense of the environment.

We need to preserve those iconic habitats, such as chalk streams, which the Government have worked so much to protect, particularly through the chalk stream

[Rebecca Pow]

restoration group, which I am proud to have instigated. We are driving forward a vision for chalk streams, including the reduction of unsustainable water extraction. That will be delivered by measures in our plan for water and via the landmark Environment Act 2021.

The plan for water also reflects the Government's commitment to a twin-track approach to improving water resilience, by investing in new supply infrastructure, and reducing demand through the reduction of leaks, as was mentioned. Of course, that is an important part, but in addition we plan to increase water efficiency. Half our additional water needs can be made up by water-demand improvements. By 2050, we expect to see leakage levels halved. Thames Water met its leakage target for 2019-20 by cutting leakage by 10.7%, but it did not do so well last year because of the dry weather and the freeze-thaw. I urge the company to get on track with its targets for leakage. That is an important part of the picture. It is not the case that it is not doing it, but it has to do it in addition to all the other things.

There are targets for reducing average per capita consumption to 110 litres per person per day. At the moment, the average is 144 litres, so there is a significant way to go. Lots of water companies are already making good strides in that direction. We have implemented legally binding demand management targets through Environment Act powers, to ensure that we remain on track to meet those targets, as I am sure the hon. Member for Twickenham will know.

We must expect all water companies to act on customers' needs for that resilient supply and to manage the water sustainably. I hope the hon. Member appreciates our collaboration with the regional water resource groups, which include Water Resources South East. I met and spent a long time talking to them about water supply over the summer, to look at what they are doing. All those groups, including Thames Water, have been consulting on their draft plans, as she pointed out. Those consultations are helping inform future decisions on the right way to secure water supplies, including for Thames Water's 10 million customers, which is a huge number to deliver water to.

To support the robustness of water resource planning, the water regulators issued detailed guidance to the water companies on how to do that. If water companies are forecasting a water supply deficit, as we will see in the south-east, they must study the options available to them and justify their preferred solutions. I understand that the Teddington direct river abstraction was one of 2,400 options modelled by Water Resources South East to address climate change and population growth and to protect our environment.

The hon. Member for Twickenham expounded on Thames not delivering any new water resources, but it is very difficult for it to do that if objections constantly arise. I will cite the Abingdon reservoir, on which another Liberal Democrat, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), secured a debate in Westminster Hall. More objections were raised about that reservoir. At some point, we have to work out where we will get this new water from. That is why we have a consultation process, to which people have rightly supplied input. I agree that they need to be listened to in the summary of what goes on, but we have to get new water supplies.

Many other water companies are facing this and we have proposals for a whole range of models, including recycling facilities, new reservoirs, such as the south Lincolnshire reservoir and the fens reservoirs, desalination plants, such as those that South West Water has put in, and extensions to other reservoirs. We have already seen quite a number of those coming into place, so there is a whole range of options and they are looking at them all.

The Environment Agency and Ofwat have helped to shape those regional plans. They are statutory consultees on the water resources management plans, and the Environment Agency also invited the Secretary of State, as the hon. Member for Twickenham knows, to consider the draft plans before they are finalised. It will be advising the Secretary of State later this year. The hon. Lady asked about the date. It is going through due process. It will be later this year. As she knows, the Secretary of State has a number of options to consider: to accept the plans, to change the plans or to trigger an inquiry.

I have mentioned all the new schemes and systems. Because this is so critical, £469 million was recently made available by Ofwat to properly investigate the range of potential strategic water resources options such as new reservoirs, recycling projects—the one that the hon. Lady is talking about is a recycling project, as she knows—and inter-regional water transfers. That is the work that is supported by RAPID, or the Regulators' Alliance for Progressing Infrastructure Development. This joint team is made up of the three regulators—Ofwat, EA and the Drinking Water Inspectorate—and works with companies to develop their strategic water resources infrastructure in the best interests of water users and the environment. The environment is absolutely critical and we must ensure that it is taken into account. I am not going to give detailed comments on the hon. Lady's particular project but obviously one of the reasons for it is to put extra water into the river to keep that flow going because we need to ensure that the environment of the river remains good. As far as I understand it, it is to be used when needed and is not a continuous use project at all.

Munira Wilson: I have a final point. Although it is meant to be a drought measure, for technical reasons, to keep the system working, what is known as a sweetener flow would have to be operational every single day, so we are talking about millions of litres of treated effluent going into the Thames every single day to keep the system going. On the Minister's point about all projects being objected to, as I pointed out in my speech, a very popular proposal in the consultation had broad public support, but Thames Water dismissed it out of hand and is proceeding with this, which will waste bill payers' money and have a massive impact on the environment. It is not the case that everyone is objecting to everything.

Rebecca Pow: I thank the hon. Lady for that. This is long term and strategic—that is what we have to talk about now in terms of water supply. I am concerned that it keeps being described as treated effluent. She will know that, once water has gone through a treatment plant and has had the full and correct treatment, it goes back into the rivers. This will have an extra layer of treatment to ensure that it really is fresh water being returned to the river. We must be very careful about how that is interpreted.

I would be the first person to say that if this goes ahead or gets the support, it has to be permitted by the EA and strictly controlled so that there are no issues about the actual quality of the water going into the river. I agree that it is important to keep the environment going, and I hope I have demonstrated that we have a robust system to look at these projects and get the water that our country needs. The new infrastructure requirements were set out in our national policy statement for water resources infrastructure, and the statement applies to the planning consent of nationally significant infrastructure projects. The proposed Teddington district river abstraction might qualify for one of those.

As I have said, the Environment Agency will be a statutory consultee on development consent orders, and the EA will also determine any abstraction licence or environmental permit. Water quality, temperature, flow and fish protection are all things that will have to be considered. I hope that the hon. Member agrees with and understands this robust process. Obviously, we need to listen to people's voices, but we also need to secure those resilient supplies for the future and for our water supply. We have a sound and robust system in place, with targets and our twin-track approach. We need to ensure that the right schemes go ahead. I thank the hon. Lady for her words.

Question put and agreed to.

Ahmadi Muslims: Pakistan

4.30 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the treatment of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I thank the House for granting us the chance to debate this matter today. The debate is a very heavily subscribed, so I will try to be as fair as can to colleagues by rustling through my speech so that everyone can have their say.

We meet at a very pertinent time, because tomorrow marks 49 years since the Pakistani constitution was amended to declare that Ahmadis are not Muslims. As I will set out later in my remarks, that was just one step in the ongoing discrimination against and persecution of the Ahmadi population in Pakistan—a process that seems to have only picked up pace rather than slowed. As the Minister will be aware, the issue is incredibly important to constituents of mine. The UK has always been a welcoming home for the Ahmadi community, many of whom have settled in my Carshalton and Wallington constituency because of its proximity to the Baitul Futuh mosque in the constituency of the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), who is the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the Ahmadiyya Muslim community—[*Interruption.*] The mosque is in Wimbledon—I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond). I thank all for attending today and look forward to hearing the response from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

The change in the constitution marked by tomorrow's anniversary was followed 10 years later by the so-called anti-Ahmadi laws, which were enacted in 1984. The ordinances made it a criminal offence for Ahmadis to call themselves Muslim or practise Islam. Alarmingly, such changes to the law have not slowed or abated; in fact, in the last decade, anti-Ahmadi changes to the law have only picked up pace. For example, in January 2015, the Government introduced a national action plan as a tool to crack down on terrorism, but a number of human rights organisations have noted that the plan has been misused to target religious communities, especially Ahmadiyya Muslims, simply for practising their faith.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing the debate and thank him for allowing me to intervene. I have often spoken up about the human rights of minorities, and freedom of religious belief is something that we should strongly protect across the globe. Does he agree that standing by while people are being discriminated against because of their religion, ethnicity or background is simply not on? Is he also concerned, like me, about the potential spillover effect to the United Kingdom of Ahmadi Muslim persecution?

Elliot Colburn: I absolutely agree with the hon. Member. In fact, later in my speech I will speak about just that subject. I am grateful to him for his intervention.

In 2017, just two years after the national action plan, the Koran publications Act was introduced, which prevented Ahmadis from publishing the holy Koran. What followed

[Elliot Colburn]

was a litany of blatant amendments to existing laws, or the introduction of new ones, that leave no question whatsoever as to their intention: not only to discriminate against Ahmadis but ultimately to persecute them in society, both symbolically and physically. That was seen just five years ago in a judgment of the Islamabad High Court that called for the nation's Ahmadis to be identifiable by adding Qadiani or Mirzai to the end of their names, or by their attire. It also called for them to be identified when applying for key roles in the civil service, education, armed forces or the judiciary—all purely to prevent anyone who is Ahmadi from holding such key posts in their country.

Those are just some of the many recent legal changes that seek to affect every layer of Pakistan's political and civil society, further pushing out and ostracising Ahmadis, whether that is through the insistence of the Khatme Nabuwat—the finality of the prophethood clause, which is against Ahmadi belief or teachings—or through even more stringent changes to blasphemy laws, including in the digital space. These state-led anti-Ahmadi legal changes are having real impacts across Pakistan. The numbers speak for themselves. I thank the many human rights and civil society organisations that have been in touch with us ahead of this debate for shining a light and maintaining these figures.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The hon. Member is making an excellent and moving speech, and I am learning a lot about the situation in Pakistan. He mentioned civil society groups. Does he agree with me that our diaspora groups need praising? It was a proud moment in your constituency, Mr Sharma, when the Ahmadiyya mosque in Southall was opened in 2020. However, we should not be complacent, and it is disturbing to know that in 2016 anti-Ahmadi leaflets were found in Stockwell, and in 2019 Channel 4 was fined £75,000 by Ofcom for Urdu-language hate speech. Would the hon. Member agree with me that we should never be complacent and should look at including the Ahmadi community in hate crime strategies in this country too?

Elliot Colburn: I absolutely agree with the hon. Member, and, extending her praise to civil society groups, I would like to break with convention and thank those who are in the Public Gallery.

I will go over some of the figures. Since 1984—that is less than 40 years ago—277 Ahmadi Muslims have been murdered. Over 220 mosques have either been demolished, sealed, set on fire or banned from being constructed. Eighty burials have been denied in common cemeteries and more than 430 graves have been desecrated. That shows the reality of what is essentially state-sanctioned, supported and encouraged discrimination and persecution of Ahmadis. It has led to emboldened harassment, attacks and even the murder of Ahmadis, as well as the denial of their rights—rights that many of us take for granted.

As I have already noted, since 1984 many have tragically been murdered simply because of their faith, with the deadliest attack on the community happening in May 2010, when the Taliban attacked worshippers during Friday prayers at two Ahmadi mosques in Lahore,

killing 86 people. One of the latest incidents was the murder of the 75-year-old Dr Rashid Ahmed in February 2023 in Gujarat, which was part of what a number of international agencies have identified as the ongoing, concentrated targeting of Ahmadis.

There is also the attack on the right to worship. Within this House and this nation, there are many people of many different faiths, and many with no faith, and they are free to choose where, how and what to believe. However, in Pakistan, 18 Ahmadiyya mosques have had minarets demolished since 2023 alone. Mosques across Pakistan have been sealed, and minarets have been demolished by police, despite there being no legal justification for such an attack. Alongside that, the right to practice their faith is under increasing attack, leaving Ahmadis isolated and in fear of their lives. The state's insistence on shutting down any public demonstration of Ahmadiyya faith is seen through Ahmadis being prohibited from building new mosques, meeting, or holding other religious gatherings, such as for Eid.

Sir Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. The point he raises about the persecution of Ahmadis is absolutely appalling. It is not just about the Government of Pakistan; it also has real effects here in the UK. I have been contacted by members of the community across Rossendale and Darwen, and in east Lancashire more generally, including by Mohammed Shafiq, the head of external affairs for the Bait ul Rasheed mosque in Blackburn. The issue he raises about the ongoing prevention of freedom of worship is that persecution of an appalling nature is not only happening in Pakistan—I have been told by members of the community that similar ideas are being imported to the UK. Although it is very good to have a Minister from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office responding to the debate, this is also an issue for Great Britain and for our fantastic Ahmadi community here in the United Kingdom.

Elliot Colburn: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that this issue has real implications in the UK through the importation of that hatred and rhetoric on to our shores. I will come on to that in more detail later.

As well as the ban on the publication of religious texts, cyber laws have also massively impacted the Ahmadis' ability to learn and practise their faith, with social media sites and websites in Pakistan being banned and shut down and websites in the UK, USA and Canada being targeted via the Pakistani state in an attempt to enact Pakistan's cyber laws.

It is not just in life that Ahmadis are targeted. Since 2021, within the last two years, more than 420 graves have been desecrated and attacked—destroyed and defaced just because they bear Koranic inscriptions. Even the grave of Pakistan's Nobel laureate, Professor Abdus Salam, has been desecrated to remove the word "Muslim" from the epitaph, such is the state's tacit—or at least implied—approval.

As for what the British Government have done, I want to thank the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office for its engagement with the APPG when we reach out—I am sure the chair will want to go into more detail on that. I thank the Minister for being willing to meet and listen to concerns, and for reaffirming

in a recent written question the UK Government's commitment to freedom of religion and belief. I am glad that Ministers will continue to raise the issue at the highest level. It is vital that the British Government continue that work through all possible channels—with their Pakistani counterparts as well as with international partners at national and NGO level, to press not just for the relaxation of anti-Ahmadi rhetoric and legislation but its full removal from penal codes and blasphemy laws. Only then can we hope to stave off the wave of anti-Ahmadi hatred.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Is the right to the free exercise of religion not fundamental to the United Nations charter? Should we not therefore hold countries to account to protect against action by the state and the condoning of lack of enforcement? After all, there are refugee conventions as well. Should we not hold countries to account for that rather, rather than having their Governments fail to satisfy the needs of their people and therefore look for scapegoats, as has happened so often in history?

Elliot Colburn: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for that intervention, and I absolutely agree with him. I look forward to hearing more about that later in the debate. He makes the point very well indeed.

It is clear that there are still huge issues for ordinary Ahmadi Muslims. What are the Government doing and what is the FCDO doing in partnership with the Home Office, as has been mentioned, to better protect and assist Ahmadis who are fleeing persecution and violence? As I have already noted, Carshalton and Wallington is home to many Ahmadi Muslims, as is the London borough of Merton next door.

In summing up, I want to underline why I believe the Government are right to pursue recourse for the Ahmadi community. They should go much further because the Pakistani Government and the widespread anti-Ahmadi violence is giving oxygen to those in other countries far beyond Pakistan's own borders. The authorities' fervent discrimination encourages anti-Ahmadi sentiment elsewhere and, as has already been said in interventions, here in the United Kingdom. In 2023 alone, we have already seen anti-Ahmadi extremism take root in other countries. In January in Burkina Faso, nine Ahmadi Muslims were brutally killed one by one after being taken from a mosque near Dori and asked to renounce their faith. They were shot dead when they refused.

In March in Bangladesh, an anti-Ahmadi extremist mob attacked the Ahmadi Muslim annual convention. The fanatics torched the homes of Ahmadi Muslims in Ahmednagar. One Ahmadi, Jahid Hasan, was killed during the attack and over 70 were injured. In Algeria, too, Ahmadis are facing ongoing discrimination. They are being denied the right to practise their faith and being targeted by the authorities. There is at least one Ahmadi prisoner of conscience serving a three-year prison sentence for practising his Ahmadi beliefs.

Alarmingly, such extremism has also reached the United Kingdom. One incredibly shocking incident took place in Glasgow in March 2016 when a shopkeeper, Asad Shah, was murdered—stabbed to death—simply because of his faith. The murderer was said to be inspired by Mumtaz Qadri of Pakistan, the bodyguard who murdered Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer, who supported a review of blasphemy laws in Pakistan.

As one Ahmadi human rights group notes, that is an incredibly worrisome reminder of the effect of anti-Ahmadi feelings being left unchecked across borders.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. I am proud to represent a vibrant Ahmadi community group in Huddersfield. In fact, many of my constituents would be shocked to hear of the persecution and discrimination that the Ahmadis face not only in the UK but around the world, because locally they see them being involved in so many positive community projects: love for all, hatred for none. I fully support my hon. Friend's request for the Foreign Office and the Home Office to continue to raise this unacceptable persecution, and I hope that we can all continue to work across the parties to support our vibrant Ahmadi community.

Elliot Colburn: I absolutely concur with my hon. Friend. I had the pleasure of attending the UK's annual convention, Jalsa Salana, over the summer recess. I know that many colleagues have attended that fantastic event before and have always found the Ahmadi community to be incredibly welcoming. It speaks well of my hon. Friend to raise that point.

I will sum up as I am conscious of time and I want to allow colleagues to speak. The FCDO needs to up the ante in the ongoing dialogue with the Pakistani Government, and to encourage them to fully remove all anti-Ahmadi laws from their constitution and their penal code. Any continuance of state-sanctioned persecution—official or otherwise—will only continue to stir anti-Ahmadi hatred and extremism, which has unfortunately taken root not only in Pakistan but elsewhere. It is not too late to strike at those roots. To do that, international pressure is paramount. I hope that the FCDO will continue to play a central role in applying that pressure, working with other nations, for the many Ahmadis whom I am proud to call constituents, for the many we are proud to have here in the United Kingdom, and for the countless number still in Pakistan who live under constant fear of persecution.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called. If there are no Divisions, I intend to call the Front Benchers at 5.10 pm. I can see six Members. *[Interruption.]* Seven—sorry, Fiona. We have about 22 minutes, so I will fix a time limit of three minutes each.

4.47 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) on securing this debate, and I thank you, Mr Sharma, for chairing it.

I do not wish to take too long because so many people want to contribute, which gives this debate great strength. We can be assured that Governments in Pakistan, both regional and national, will know of it; they will be watching it and it will have an impact. It is great that so many people from nearly all the parties represented in our Parliament have taken the time to be here today. I have the privilege of being chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. It is one of the easier tasks as an APPG

[Siobhain McDonagh]

officer; due to the incredible lobbying of the community, we are always quorate with very little effort.

We know about the harassment and discrimination that Ahmadi experience in Pakistan and how that percolates to other countries, including, regrettably, our own. The APPG undertook an in-depth investigation into discrimination in Pakistan. The single most depressing fact that I took from all the evidence sessions was that Ahmadi are discriminated against more strongly by younger people than by older people. Liberalism is in reverse in Pakistan, and the discrimination that the community feels is likely to be of a long-standing nature. That is in part because the Government of Pakistan have withdrawn from the responsibility to educate their young people and given the responsibility to people who hold extreme views on religion.

As one of the largest contributors to international aid in Pakistan, Britain has a role to consider how that investment is used. It took me a long time to get to the bottom of the fact that FCDO money was being used to produce books in schools that discriminated against Ahmadi. Will the Minister address the nature of investment in international development in Pakistan? How can he ensure that it does nothing that encourages the discrimination that exists from birth to death? The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington explained how that affects all levels of civil life and the community. With that, I will sit down.

4.50 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I will focus on two matters of justice: first, the restrictions on Ahmadi Muslim lawyers practising in Afghanistan, and secondly, the detention of Ahmadi religious prisoners of conscience.

Recent announcements in parts of Pakistan that Ahmadi Muslim lawyers must effectively renounce their religion to practice their profession are completely unacceptable. That both the District Bar Association of Gujranwala and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Bar Council have issued notices saying that anyone applying for admittance to the Bar must positively assert that they are Muslim and denounce the teachings of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community and its founder is a profound breach of the freedom of religion or belief of those lawyers and contrary to international legal standards. It infringes on the freedom of religion or belief of not only the lawyers but any individual who seeks access to justice through representation by one of those lawyers.

I understand that Ahmadi Muslims already find it more difficult to secure legal representation, because threats against advocates who offer to defend Ahmadi Muslims are commonplace. We hear accounts of physical attacks against lawyers, even in the courtroom itself. One such account was on 27 April this year, when a 77-year-old advocate, Syed Ali Ahmad Tariq, was assaulted by other lawyers while practicing in court.

Nick Vineall KC, chair of the Bar Council of England and Wales, has urged the Pakistan Bar Council to take action, specifically on the decisions by the district Bar councils I referred to. He stated that

“such actions are intentionally discriminatory and seem impossible to reconcile with Pakistan’s constitutional principles of religious freedom and equity before the law.”

Pakistan adopted the universal declaration of human rights in 1948, which includes article 18 on freedom of religion or belief. It also ratified the international convention on civil and political rights. The clear targeting of Ahmadiyya lawyers may well prevent aspiring advocates from entering their chosen profession, or force them to choose between their religion and their profession.

I ask the Minister to press the Government of Pakistan and their appropriate senior law officers to take similar action to that urged by Nick Vineall KC and urge the Pakistan Bar Council to ensure that steps are taken to retract the regulations and prevent threats, intimidation and physical attacks against lawyers. I regret that time does not allow me to turn to my second concern, which is the detention of Ahmadiyya Muslim religious prisoners of conscience.

4.54 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): The problem with this debate is that it has a sad, grave element of déjà vu. I have brought along my file. Some other Members who were here way back in 2014 will remember that we discussed at that time the UN rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief. I will quickly quote what he said:

“I am very concerned by the recent surge of violent attacks against Ahmadiyya Muslims by militant extremists. Such violence is fuelled by existing blasphemy legislation”.

He urged Pakistan to

guarantee the right to freedom of religion or belief”,

and went on to suggest that it should

“put in place protective measures to ensure...personal security”,

and ensure that those who perpetrate such crimes are brought to justice. That was in the report that we debated almost 10 years ago, in 2014.

Since then, we have had a litany of these debates, year after year. Soon after that report came out, a mosque was torched, and attacks and individual murders took place. That went on year after year, as reported. In 2020, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) said, we produced a report, “Suffocation of the Faithful: the Persecution of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan and the Rise of International Extremism”, and at that point we raised the issue of education.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is making a powerful point. We must not stop using everything in this House to continue to raise this issue. If we stop doing it and the Pakistan Government will not listen, there is no chance; at least if we continue to raise the issue of persecution, there is a chance that it can be alleviated.

John McDonnell: That is exactly the point that we have made consistently. Every time there is an outrage, bringing it to the Floor of the House is important, because that is noted back in Pakistan. The view now is that the pattern has been consistent, and successive Pakistani Governments have refused to budge.

There has been continuous censorship, a denial of voting rights, the ban on the publication of religious texts and imprisonment for blasphemy—three years just for an Ahmadi calling themselves a Muslim. There are also the implications of what is happening in education. Numbers of people are on death row as a result of the laws that have been put in place.

Everything comes back to the pressure we can apply. Over this period, we have consistently made several demands, including that the Pakistan Government prosecute those instigating hate; offer urgent protection to Ahmadi Muslims; investigate the train of unprovoked violence; repeal the blasphemy legislation; and generally uphold rights. We have a specific role as a Government: the UK plays a specific role in relation to Pakistan. We now need to examine all points of pressure that we can exert. I do not want to be here in another 10 years debating the same issues once again.

4.57 pm

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I welcome the debate and the fact that so many colleagues from all parties have attended. That shows not only the extent of the persecution that the Ahmadiyya community suffers in Pakistan, but the amazing contribution that the British Ahmadiyya community make in our country with their charitable works in our society, day in, day out, and with their message of peace—His Holiness is one of the greatest speakers on that.

I work with colleagues on the APPG and we have heard the evidence they have set forth today. Like the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who just spoke, I have a sense of déjà vu. In fact, it is worse than that: the situation in Pakistan for the Ahmadiyya community is getting worse, particularly given the political chaos there that is creating a vacuum. Extremists are exploiting that vacuum, and we are seeing yet more mosques desecrated, more assaults and more murders.

The British Government therefore have to up their game and raise their voice, working with other countries around the world to ensure that the Pakistani Government and authorities are in no doubt. There may be that vacuum in Pakistani politics at the moment, but it is the army, the police force and the authorities who are propagating the persecution and abuse. They need to hear our voice loud and clear.

I am genuinely worried about where things will go if we do not see some change after all these years. Those of us who have worked with the Holocaust Education Trust, been on trips to Auschwitz, and seen the eight steps to genocide, worry about the fact that that is in the constitution of Pakistan, and that the situation there is getting worse. The path is extremely worrying. Some might say that sounds alarmist—I do not use the analogy lightly—but I feel that our voice must be heard more clearly than it has been.

I urge the Minister, in his response to the debate, to make it clear what actions the Government are taking and what they are considering. Are they considering removing trade preferences? One thing we can do is reach out to the Ahmadi refugees around the world—in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Malaysia—and work with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to make sure they can come to this country and settle with the families they have here. I have a constituent who is an Afghan Ahmadi whose family has been moved to Pakistan. They would like to resettle. They are acknowledged by the UNHCR, but the Home Office is not listening. I urge the Minister to say what action the Government are taking against the Government of Pakistan and what action we are taking to help Ahmadi Muslims around the world.

5 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Sharma, and to be called in this important debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) on securing it. Given the upcoming elections in Pakistan and the increasing discrimination against the Ahmadis because of them, the timing of the debate could not be better.

Pakistan is a wonderful, beautiful country with whom the UK has a strong relationship. When I visited earlier this year on a delegation with the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, we were warmly welcomed by Ministers, the Speaker of the Assembly, organisations and many residents. We want the best for Pakistan and feel that this discrimination against one particular community is holding back the country. That is why we care so much.

The Ahmadiyya Muslims are a very important part of my community. There are many thousands in Putney, Southfields and Roehampton. We have many celebrations together, and I see them living out their motto—love for all, hatred for none—on a daily basis. Before I went to Pakistan, I heard from many constituents about the persecution they felt, but seeing it for myself was shocking. I saw persecution and discrimination faced every single day in schools, at work, on the streets, in law courts, in shops, and even in cemeteries. Since the Lahore massacre of 94 people in 2010, most women and children that I met had not attended the mosque for fear of violence.

The 1973 Pakistan constitution enshrines freedom of religion and belief and says that

“every citizen shall have the right to profess, practice and propagate his religion”.

The test of that constitution is when it gets difficult—when there are differing beliefs or theologies. That is when it matters even more that human rights are protected. Ahmadis cannot turn to the democratic system to defend their rights, because they are not allowed to vote or stand for Parliament. They cannot turn to the justice system either. Fifty Ahmadi Muslims are currently in prison solely on account of their faith. Eid festival celebrations this year led to massive police raids to the homes of Ahmadi people who were just practising their faith, with 12 Ahmadis arrested for visiting family and friends to take part in the celebrations.

I urge the Government to press the Government of Pakistan to do the following: allow all Ahmadis to vote in the upcoming elections; release all Ahmadi Muslim prisoners of conscience; revoke the anti-Ahmadi measures and laws taken by Bar councils and Bar associations in Pakistan to target Ahmadi Muslim lawyers; provide protection to all citizens of Pakistan against religious-based violence; and repeal the draconian anti-Ahmadi laws and blasphemy laws that are being used to deny freedom of religion and legitimise violence against religious communities in Pakistan. Finally, the Government should sanction anti-Ahmadi preachers and reject any visa applications from them to visit the UK.

5.2 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): First, I pay tribute to the Ahmadiyya community in my Glasgow Central constituency. They have always been incredibly welcoming to me, my colleagues and their neighbours

[Alison Thewliss]

and friends in Yorkhill, where their mosque is located. I particularly thank Ahmed Owusu-Konadu for the work he does in the local community. They have regular fundraising events for many charities, including Glasgow Children's Hospital Charity, which I know is greatly appreciated.

The more I have got to know the Ahmadi community over the years, the more I have heard about the pressure, danger and threats that they have been under. Members have already spoken of the persecution of Ahmadi Muslims and the fact that this has been going on for decades. Those practising their faith, particularly but sadly not exclusively in Pakistan, have been persecuted and discriminated against—in life and in death, in mosques, in their graves, in businesses and at observances of Eid. They have faced attacks simply for wanting to keep their faith.

What makes this all the worse is that it is endorsed by the Pakistani constitution. It has disturbing consequences for us here in the UK. In 2016, Asad Shah was murdered in the neighbouring constituency to mine—[Interruption.]

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): Order. The sitting is suspended for 15 minutes.

5.4 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

5.19 pm

On resuming—

Alison Thewliss: As I was saying, this very disturbing aspect of the Pakistani constitution has consequences in the real world. In 2016, Asad Shah was murdered in the neighbouring constituency to mine, his killer inspired by hate speech.

What safeguards are put in place in terms of visas for people coming to the UK? I understand from much of the briefing the Ahmadiyya community has provided that a number of hate preachers have come to the UK on visas and preached their hate, which has consequences for our communities. What safeguards are in place to ensure that that does not happen, and is not allowed to happen, because people, wherever they are, have the right to practise their faith as they wish to in safety and security and without persecution.

5.20 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I say what a pleasure it is to speak in this debate? I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. I thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn), who, as always, has brought excellent issues to the House for us all to support, and he does that well.

Pakistan holds a very dear and special place in my heart. As an MP, I have had the privilege of visiting the country a number of times, the latest being in February with the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson)—she will forgive me for not mentioning all three parts of her constituency. We had a good presentation, we were well received and we learned a lot.

There has been a surge in the prosecution faced by Ahmadi Muslims, alongside a spike in blasphemy allegations that disproportionately impacts such communities. Since February, the situation has deteriorated. Only this Monday, masked men used sledgehammers to damage the minarets on the rooftop of an Ahmadi mosque in Karachi. Reports indicate that a mob attacked the mosque at the time of the Zuhur prayer. As well as destroying the minarets, the mob started chanting slogans against the Ahmadi community and attacking worshippers. That was the second attack this year on the building.

The persecution of Pakistan's Ahmadi Muslim community has been sustained and systemic. The situation of Ahmadis in Pakistan is also unique, as the group is excluded from the protections other religious minorities have. They are not allowed to vote. Could you imagine, Mr Sharma, how we would feel if we were not allowed to vote? That is how the Ahmadis feel. Even the National Commission for Minorities in Pakistan excludes Ahmadis, when it is supposed to be all-embracing.

Blasphemy cases lodged against Ahmadis have increased tenfold in the last year, and the persecution by the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan party has been significant. Some of the chants and statements coming from TLP supporters mention carrying out attacks against pregnant Ahmadi Muslim mothers to

“ensure that no new Ahmadis are born”.

Those things are totally unacceptable. Graveyards are being desecrated, mosques are being forced to close and acts of violence and graffiti are being committed. We have heard multiple credible reports of members of the police or the armed forces standing by and allowing acts of violence to occur with impunity. Ahmadis have been accused of blasphemy as well.

In the last 30 seconds I will finish with this—it may be many more words in a half a minute than anybody else! As a country, the UK has learned through its long history that when religious minorities are denied rights, it harms the rest of society. When they have been granted equal rights, the UK has thrived. My beseeching to the Minister in the discussions he and our British Government will have with the Pakistan Government is this: I urge the Government of Pakistan to enact the principle of freedom of religious belief for all. We have it, and they should have it.

5.23 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for securing today's debate. There should be no doubt that the principle of freedom of religion is a fundamental one that must be upheld for all, yet too many people face persecution throughout the world for their views, and it is particularly disappointing to hear that such intolerant attitudes may be spreading to these islands.

As we have heard, the Ahmadis view themselves as within Islam and proclaim a Muslim identity, but other Islamic schools of thought view Ahmadi theology as outside Islam. We have heard that the 1974 Pakistan constitution formally denounced the Ahmadis as not part of the Muslim faith. In 1984 and 1986, the Pakistan penal code was amended and stipulated up to three years in prison if Ahmadis posed as Muslims by worshipping in non-Ahmadi mosques, performing the

Muslim call to prayer, using the traditional Islamic greeting in public and disseminating religious materials or propagating their faith. The penal code contains a blasphemy law that includes the death penalty, with no evidence required for Ahmadi. The Ahmadi are commonly victims of targeted killings, hate speech and the destruction of their homes, mosques and tombs and have no recourse to justice procedures as they are not considered equal citizens.

Perhaps most worryingly, the violent treatment of Ahmadi is becoming more normalised in Pakistan, sadly often with the assistance of the authorities. From January to July 2023, more than 170 graves and at least two houses of worship were destroyed. In July 2023, 53 Ahmadi graves were desecrated in the Gujranwala district under police supervision, and security forces arrested several Ahmadi for conducting Islamic ritual slaughter in celebration of the Eid al-Adha holiday and thereby posing as Muslims.

In 2022, the Commons International Development Committee, in its report on UK aid to Pakistan, said that the country's blasphemy laws are frequently misused to settle personal disputes and to target religious minorities. In 2020, there was an increase in blasphemy charges, with at least 199 people charged. Those accused were often subject to mob justice and even extrajudicial killings. Omar Waraich, head of south Asia at Amnesty International, said:

"There are few communities in Pakistan who have suffered as much as the Ahmadi. The recent wave of killings tragically underscores not just the seriousness of the threats they face, but also the callous indifference of the authorities, who have failed to protect the community or punish the perpetrators."

How do we turn today's consensual debate and desire to see a positive outcome into action that benefits the Ahmadi Muslims? The UK is Pakistan's largest European trading, investment and development partner and one of Pakistan's leading development assistance partners, so I urge the UK Government to use that partnership to encourage Pakistan to abide by its international obligations.

The first step towards ending violence for the Ahmadi should be the revocation of the blasphemy law. Clearly, as the situation is fraught with historical tension and identity rooted in religion, any action and calls must be an exercise in strategic advocacy and diplomacy. The UK has one of the largest Pakistani diaspora communities in Europe, estimated at over 1.6 million, and Pakistan relies heavily on the UK for international development and trade. I therefore urge the UK Government to exhaust all diplomatic channels to convey the need to protect religious minorities and take a stance against the normalisation of religious persecution.

It would not be possible to discuss this vulnerable international minority without some mention of the UK position of cutting international aid spending. In Pakistan, UK bilateral official development assistance spending reduced from £463 million in 2016 to £133 million in 2023-24. The UK Government maintain that their aid spending in Pakistan is geared towards supporting the most vulnerable in the country, including religious minorities such as the Ahmadi. Yet this dramatic decrease puts the future development of marginalised groups at risk and is specifically damaging to the Ahmadi, who have no institutional support in Pakistan and face discrimination in the Pakistan constitution.

In conclusion, I call for the UK Government to be a critical friend. Any Government who do not use their influence to stand up to their friends when their friends are using their domestic laws to systematically oppress members of their own society are a Government with questionable priorities. The UK Government must continue to work with Pakistan and international partners and use the principles of peace and democracy under the Commonwealth to safeguard the Ahmadi in Pakistan.

5.28 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. It was also a pleasure to hear the opening speech from the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) and to hear about the work of the all-party group chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), which does such an excellent job of highlighting the discrimination against the Ahmadi community.

The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) is known in this place for raising the issue of freedom of religion or belief, which she carefully laid out today, and we in this Parliament hold such concepts of peace and democracy dear. In every country and every community, we firmly believe that people should be able to live their lives as they wish and to pray and worship in whichever way they feel most appropriate.

However, in many parts of the world, religion and belief can lead to persecution, and Pakistan is sadly among those places. In debates on freedom of religion, we have repeatedly raised concerns about blasphemy laws and the worrying situation for minorities in Pakistan. It is right that we are able to use this opportunity to shine a spotlight on the treatment of Ahmadi Muslims, which is so often overlooked. In fact, even the true figure for the population of Ahmadi is not really known. The House of Commons Library was unable to confirm it. It could be up to 4.5 million people, but because many people are not included in the census, it is difficult to know the exact number of people in the community.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) about the legal changes and the subsequent application of Pakistan's penal code prohibiting Ahmadi Muslims from declaring their faith publicly, propagating their faith, printing or obtaining material related to their faith, building mosques or calling their places of worship mosques, and making the call for Muslim prayers. Virtually any public act of worship, devotion or propagation by an Ahmadi can be treated as blasphemy, a criminal offence punishable by a fine, imprisonment or death. That is a draconian and repressive approach to a minority group who, until relatively recently, were seen legally as Muslims.

According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, desecrations of Ahmadi gravestones, an appalling act of disrespect, are a regular occurrence. Such actions were described by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who has been raising these issues in the House since before 2014. According to the community's own records, in 2020 alone 164 Ahmadi gravestones were desecrated by anti-Ahmadi actors.

It is clear that the community is persecuted and it is of little surprise that the global Ahmadi community, some of whom are with us in the Gallery today, has moved

[Catherine West]

its headquarters to the safety of London. However, as many Members have already said and I am sure the Minister will mention in his concluding remarks, we need to be aware of the cyber element. I am sure there are people who feel under attack, being a minority here in the UK. We must all be aware of that and the Government must be active on it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) mentioned the particular issue around the civil society groups in the UK, who educate others on the importance of the community but worry about the ongoing persecution in Pakistan and beyond.

I know that the Minister will wish to respond to the points made by the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, who secured this debate, and the specific concerns raised by the community in his constituency, so I will keep my own questions for the Minister brief.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) said earlier in the debate that it is right that our Government should hold Pakistan to account because we have a lot to do with Pakistan in so many areas, whether that is through the diaspora or through our strong relationships with the country. We are in a very good position when we talk about things such as climate change, poverty, women's rights and so on with colleagues in Pakistan. Is the Minister absolutely sure that no UK aid money is being used—perhaps unwittingly—to aid or abet any persecution of the Ahmadi community? Can he say what the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is doing to protect and promote tolerance, diversity and religious freedoms in Pakistan, specifically where we have that link-in with UK aid?

5.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty):

I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for securing this important debate. I commend his work and his ongoing support of freedom of religion or belief. I also pay tribute to his work as vice-chair as the all-party parliamentary group for the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, which continues its vital work to raise awareness of the issues that we have been discussing today. I know that my hon. Friend addressed the annual conference in Hampshire earlier this summer, which was a very important event.

Colleagues will know that the noble Lord Ahmad, Minister of State for the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and the UN, is responsible for this portfolio, but being in the other place he cannot speak in this Chamber. Therefore it is my great pleasure to respond on his behalf today. I met him in advance of the debate to talk about this topic. Members will acknowledge his personal deep insight into these issues.

I am very grateful to hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. We recognise the strength of feeling. I will try to respond to the points that have been raised.

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Leo Docherty: Very briefly.

Mr Lord: In particular there was an allegation, or certainly a strong implication, that UK international aid might be going towards textbooks that contain lies or expressions of hatred. Can the Minister assure the House that our aid does not go directly, or indirectly through Governments, NGOs or charities, to textbooks or educational aids that contain lies or hate, and that it will not do so in the future either?

Leo Docherty: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for putting that question again. I was already going to respond to it; I am grateful to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for putting the same question earlier. We continue to engage on the critical need for freedom of religion or belief in schools. The UK has supported initiatives to review the national curriculum of Pakistan, providing technical assistance to Pakistan to create a more inclusive curriculum and textbooks, so it is something we are very much aware of. At Pakistan's universal periodic review in January, the UK formally recommended that Pakistan ensures that school textbooks are inclusive of all religions and that religious minorities can access suitable alternatives to compulsory Koranic studies. That was, of course, at the UN periodic review of human rights. We do keep that continually in our sights. I cannot confirm 100% today that there is not an ongoing problem, but it is something that our mission and our other diplomats are energetically focused on.

Although the debate centres on the persecution of the Ahmadiyya community, I think it would be useful to reaffirm the Government's commitment to defending the rights and freedoms of all those persecuted for their religious beliefs in Pakistan and, indeed, across the world. The Ahmadiyya Muslim community's roots run deep in Pakistan, as has been mentioned. From Abdus Salam, Pakistan's first Nobel laureate, to its distinguished first Foreign Minister, Sir Muhammad Zafarullah Khan, Ahmadi Muslims have made a tremendously invaluable contribution to modern Pakistan. It is poignant that a community so entwined with the founding of that country now faces such devastating persecution.

As has been described today by colleagues, the situation is dire—we recognise that. Discrimination against Ahmadi Muslims and other religious groups starts with Pakistan's constitution, which declares Ahmadis non-Muslims. The misuse of Pakistan's blasphemy laws to target marginalised communities is all too common. Preventive legislation is weak, and poor implementation of existing laws allows hate speech and violence to spread with impunity. Over the past few weeks alone, we have seen the appalling incidents of mob violence in Pakistan and the desecration of Ahmadi, as well as Christian and Hindu, places of worship. We stand in solidarity with the victims, and I know all our thoughts go out to those affected. Colleagues may have noticed that today Lord Ahmad tweeted in condemnation of the recent appalling attack on the Ahmadiyya Hall in Karachi in Sindh province.

In terms of UK action, defending religious freedom is at the heart of all our work in Pakistan. Our approach to protecting freedom of religion or belief of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community and all persecuted groups has three pillars. First, we use our close relationship with Pakistan to influence and advocate. Secondly, we support communities through our programme and development work. Thirdly, we use our global influence to spur the wider international community into action.

John McDonnell: I do not want to take up too much time, but the whole debate is about how we can exert pressure. Can I just put on the table the potential consideration of the use of Magnitsky sanctions against individuals involved in the persecution of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan? Many of them have links with this country, including financial links, so Magnitsky sanctions might prove effective.

Leo Docherty: I am grateful for that intervention. The right hon. Gentleman will know that the UK has a long-standing relationship with Pakistan, underpinned, as has been described today, by our deep shared history and cultural links. We build on that relationship to advocate for the most vulnerable in Pakistan society, calling out repression in public and in private at the highest levels.

In January, the Minister for development and Africa, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), underlined the need for Pakistan to ensure the safety and religious freedom of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community when he met the then Prime Minister, Shehbaz Sharif. The Minister for South Asia, Lord Ahmad, spoke with Pakistan's former Minister for Human Rights, Mian Riaz Hussain Pirzada, in June to raise the persecution of religious communities, including Pakistan's deeply troubling blasphemy laws. He also emphasised the importance of promoting respect for all religions during his meeting with then Foreign Minister, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, in December.

It is crucial that the voices of marginalised religious communities are heard. Everyone in Pakistan, including Ahmadi Muslims, must be able to fully participate in Pakistan's upcoming elections, as has been described today by colleagues. We therefore continue to urge the Government of Pakistan to uphold these constitutional principles of equality. Lord Ahmad has written to Pakistan's caretaker Foreign Minister, Jalil Abbas Jilani, to urge the Government to ensure that all Pakistan's citizens can exercise their democratic rights. The Foreign Minister has replied, assuring us of the Government's commitment to the safety and security of all Pakistani citizens, regardless of their religious affiliation. Prime Minister Kakar said publicly on 21 August that the state and its laws will stand with oppressed groups, including Ahmadi Muslims, when they are under attack. It is vital that those words are followed through with concrete action.

The UK Government will continue to work with the Government of Pakistan on peaceful, credible and inclusive elections over the coming months. It is crucial that our advocacy continues to be informed by the lived experience of the community we seek to protect. In May, the UK political counsellor visited Rabwah, home to 95% of Pakistan's Ahmadi Muslims, to gain a deeper insight into the challenges faced by the community. Our high commissioner continues to raise those issues in her calls with senior Government officials, religious leaders and politicians.

Alongside that diplomatic advocacy, our programmes in Pakistan are focused on improving the lives of Pakistan's most vulnerable citizens. Our Aawaz II programme brings together community leaders and minority representatives to promote tolerance in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab provinces. Our hate speech and disinformation programme works to protect marginalised religious

communities and women against hate speech online—an important issue that was raised in the debate. Through the FCDO's Magna Carta and John Bunyan funds, we have supported research projects to improve our understanding of the challenges that these communities face.

Of course, we cannot tackle such a complex issue alone. We work in concert with our like-minded diplomatic partners, and we continue to use our influence to spur the international community to action. I would like to recognise the work of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, ably chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), which has been active in raising the plight of Ahmadi Muslims. In March 2022, the alliance called on states to end the discrimination faced by the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, and to defend their right to freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief.

Last July, we hosted an international conference on freedom of religion or belief, bringing together 100 Government delegations, 800 faith and belief leaders, human rights experts and NGOs, to agree action to protect those freedoms. During the conference, the Minister responsible for human rights, Lord Ahmad, announced new funding to support those who defend religious freedom, including those who are targeted for their fearless activism. As a result of the conference, 47 Governments, and international organisations and other entities pledged to take action to support those fundamental rights.

In January, we used our platform at the United Nations in Geneva to shine a light on the issue, and we continue to hold Pakistan to account, for instance by using our statement at Pakistan's universal periodic review adoption in July to publicly urge the Pakistani authorities to ensure the safety and religious freedom of Ahmadi Muslims.

I would like to assure my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington and all colleagues who participated in this important and powerful debate that the FCDO works in close partnership with the Home Office and across Government on all these important issues.

Fleur Anderson: Will the list include something about visas for hate preachers coming to the UK? Will that issue be looked into?

Leo Docherty: I am glad that the hon. Lady raised that, as did the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss)—she is not in her place now, but she notified me that she would be leaving. I am pleased to report that we do consider that when visas are issued. Our immigration laws allow us to screen and prevent such people on that basis. I am glad she made that point: we have the capacity to stop such people, and we will use it if necessary.

The UK has a proud history of providing protection for those who need it, through our safe and legal routes, as I mentioned. We continue to welcome refugees and people in need through our global resettlement schemes, working in conjunction with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

Let me conclude by reaffirming that the UK stands in solidarity with the persecuted Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan and all around the world. We will continue our energetic diplomatic advocacy and our programmes. We are grateful for the contributions of all Members on this important issue in this debate.

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): I call Elliot Colburn—30 seconds.

5.43 pm

Elliot Colburn: I thank the Minister and the noble Lord Ahmad for that reply. I thank colleagues for turning out in such good numbers today. I thank the community for appearing to support us today. I hope

that the Minister will continue to do all that he can, so that we can truly achieve the Ahmadiyya motto: “Love for all, hatred for none.”

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the treatment of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan.

5.44 pm

Sitting adjourned.

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