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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**  
(HANSARD)

Thursday 10 October 2024

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# House of Commons

*Thursday 10 October 2024*

*The House met at half-past Nine o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[Mr SPEAKER in the Chair]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### TRANSPORT

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### **Chiltern Railways: Capacity**

1. **Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst** (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): If she will take steps to help expedite the approval of additional trains to increase capacity on Chiltern Railways. [900466]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood):** Officials will continue to work with Children Railways to support the delivery of its fleet renewal programme to improve passenger experience and drive sustainable growth across the region. Chiltern is exploring options to expedite its procurement of additional trains while following robust assurance steps to ensure that it has a strong business case that delivers value for money for the taxpayer.

**Dr Shastri-Hurst:** Chiltern Railways has the oldest fleet of any operator at over 30 years of age, and additional capacity is needed to meet the demands of my constituents in Solihull West and Shirley. While I welcome the Department's commitment to reducing overcrowding by moving more rolling stock to where it is needed in the network, can the Minister expand on the specific steps the Department is taking to reduce overcrowding on the Chiltern main line?

**Simon Lightwood:** Chiltern's business case assesses both like-for-like and enhanced capacity rolling stock options. Like-for-like offers similar capacity to the current fleet but more modern trains to deliver a better customer proposition. Enhanced capacity would enable Chiltern to run more services to relieve crowding. Both options are still under consideration ahead of further market engagement. A final decision will be made taking into consideration value for money and affordability.

#### **Old Oak Common Station Construction: South-west Travel Disruption**

2. **Jayne Kirkham** (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to help mitigate disruption to rail passengers travelling to the south-west when construction of Old Oak Common station begins. [900467]

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Louise Haigh):** Nowhere is the Tory legacy of transport failure more obvious than in the legacy we have been left on High Speed 2, with costs allowed to run completely out of control, communities ignored, and misery for passengers baked into the plans. My Department is working with the rail industry to minimise disruption during the construction of Old Oak Common station, including through a £30 million investment in mitigations that will allow services to continue to operate during the disruption.

**Jayne Kirkham:** Our railway in the south-west is too slow, too fragile and too expensive. Does the Transport Secretary agree with me and colleagues across Cornwall, the south-west and Wales that this new HS2 station will mean slower and more disrupted journeys? Will she meet me and a delegation of south-west MPs to discuss mitigation of the legacy she has inherited from the last Government to ensure that the south-west does not suffer now and in the future because of that disruption?

**Louise Haigh:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for rightly raising these issues. I will be delighted to meet her to discuss the mitigations. Efforts will be made to minimise the impact on passengers, including trains terminating at either Ealing Broadway or Reading, but we will work with her to monitor and minimise disruption for her constituents.

**Dr Ben Spencer** (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Traffic delays at level crossings in Egham, Addlestone and Chertsey are punishing my constituents, and engineering works and diversion routes just make that worse. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss how we can mitigate and improve our level crossings, especially during these engineering works?

**Louise Haigh:** I fully appreciate the implications of Network Rail engineering works, and the construction and maintenance of level crossings in particular. I will happily pass on the hon. Member's request for a meeting to the Minister for Rail in the other place.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Dr Kieran Mullan** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): One of the ways in which we could improve the reliability of all our train services is through reform of working practices such as annual leave and weekend working. Agreeing a no-strings deal with ASLEF forced the Secretary of State into agreeing a no-strings deal with the RMT. How does she plan to recover from such a weak negotiating position for future rounds? What progress has she made on proposals—our proposals, I should say—for a pay review body for public rail workers?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am sure that question must be related in some way to Old Oak Common. I think we need to be more descriptive when asking such questions. Secretary of State, answer as you wish.

**Louise Haigh:** I am happy to answer that question, Mr Speaker. The two-year industrial dispute cost the taxpayer £25 million a day every time the Tories oversaw a strike day. The reforms that they pursued cost taxpayers hundreds of millions of pounds. We have since settled

the national pay dispute and localised disputes on London North Eastern Railway and CrossCountry, leading to improved passenger services across the country.

### Road Safety

3. **Jake Richards** (Rother Valley) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve road safety. [900468]

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Louise Haigh):** Every death on our roads is a tragedy; for too long, they have been treated as an inevitability. The safety of our roads is an absolute priority for this Government. Since the general election, the Department has begun work on a new road safety strategy, the first in more than a decade, which will support our mission to build an NHS fit for the future.

**Jake Richards:** Last week, I met South Yorkshire police to raise the issue of speeding and in particular the phenomenon of boy racers, which is a problem across my constituency, particularly in Broom, Sitwell and Whiston, as well as along the A57 around the Todwick roundabout. That was a constructive meeting, but what steps are the Government taking to clamp down on this dangerous problem?

**Louise Haigh:** I applaud my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. I know the blight that such antisocial behaviour and speeding has on communities, particularly in areas like the one he represents. A key part of our safer streets mission is to take back our streets, and the Government will give police the powers they need to seize illegal, dangerous and antisocial vehicles and take them off the streets for good, so that they can quickly be crushed. We are working on delivering the road safety strategy, the first in over a decade, to reduce antisocial behaviour, injuries and tragic deaths on our roads.

**Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): In Hinckley, we have one of the most bashed bridges in Britain; it gets hit every two weeks on average. It is on the A5, which also has some black spots for accidents and pinch points. Will the Secretary of State arrange for a meeting between me and the Roads Minister, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), to talk about how we can get through the improvements that have been looked at for the last few years to ensure that our bridges are not hit and that we do not have black spots on the A5?

**Louise Haigh:** I am grateful to the hon. Member for raising that important issue. It is clear, with stats like those, that it needs some attention. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Roads Minister will be happy to meet him.

**Jacob Collier** (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): Between 60,000 and 90,000 vehicles pass through the A50/A500 corridor every single day, but the road is slow and unreliable, with average rush hour speeds below 20 mph. The road is a daily nightmare for residents of Uttoxeter and the surrounding areas, and serves as a significant barrier to economic growth. Will the Minister commit to meeting me in Uttoxeter to see for herself the upgrades that are needed?

**Louise Haigh:** I fear I may be filling up the diary of my hon. Friend the Roads Minister, but I am sure she would be happy to meet my hon. Friend the Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) to discuss the road in question.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Road safety is one of the main reasons why young people do not cycle, and that is particularly true in cities such as Bath, where the historic infrastructure makes it difficult. What will the Government do to help young cyclists in particular by making roads safer in Bath?

**Louise Haigh:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that point, and it sits at the heart of our ambition to develop the new road safety strategy. The previous Government pursued poisonous culture wars against road users of all descriptions. We are determined to take back streets for pedestrians, cyclists and drivers, and that will be at the heart of our new ambition for the road safety strategy.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Road safety is inextricably linked to the state of our roads. [Interruption.] Government Members might want to wait. New polling suggests that surface conditions on major roads are getting worse, risking more accidents. Will the Secretary of State confirm—a yes or no answer will suffice—whether her Government will maintain the previous Conservative Government's commitment to £11 billion in road repair budgets?

**Louise Haigh:** I was fascinated to know how Opposition Front Benchers would approach their legacy when raising questions today. The legacy we have been left includes a maintenance backlog of billions and billions of pounds on our local roads. It is one of the biggest issues facing people across the country, and our manifesto committed us to repair and prevent up to a million potholes a year.

### Midlands Rail Hub: Stakeholders

4. **Nigel Huddleston** (Droitwich and Evesham) (Con): If she will meet stakeholders in the midlands to discuss plans to build the midlands rail hub. [900469]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood):** As the hon. Member will know, Network Rail is in the process of procuring design for the delivery of the western phase of the midlands rail hub scheme. While a business case is being developed for later phases, we would of course be happy to meet the hon. Member and stakeholders to discuss progress on the programme.

**Nigel Huddleston:** I very much appreciate that response. I would appreciate it as well if the Minister could give us some idea of the timing of this really important investment for the region, which will add considerably to the economic prospects of the west midlands.

**Lilian Greenwood:** I appreciate how important it is to improve rail infrastructure in the midlands. The next major decision on the first phase will be to consider the release of delivery funding in around four years' time,

but in the meantime we are expecting a business case for the subsequent phases of the programme to inform next steps, which will be ready next year.

### **Trams: Leeds and West Yorkshire**

**5. Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds North East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support proposals for a tram system in Leeds and West Yorkshire. [900470]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood):** The Secretary of State has met the Mayor of West Yorkshire, Tracy Brabin, to discuss the vital role that mass transit can play in delivering sustainable economic growth and housing and to improve connectivity to jobs, healthcare and education in the region. The Department is working in partnership with the West Yorkshire combined authority to support the development of the combined authority's business case, to help bring forward the benefits of mass transit in West Yorkshire.

**Fabian Hamilton:** Leeds North East is the only constituency in the city without a railway station. Leeds is the largest city in Europe without a rail-based public transport system. Plans for mass transit networks in West Yorkshire are essential for jobs and our local economy, so will the Minister join me in congratulating the Mayor of West Yorkshire, Tracy Brabin, on her plans to build a tram network in Leeds in the very near future?

**Simon Lightwood:** West Yorkshire combined authority has been allocated £200 million of Government funding for 2022 to 2027 to develop a new mass transit system, including £160 million from the city region sustainable transport settlement, and £40 million from the integrated rail plan. I commend the hard work and tenacity of Tracy Brabin as the Mayor of West Yorkshire, who is determined to create a better connected region that works for everyone.

**Mr Speaker:** Could Members stand every time so that I know they want to ask a question? I call Tom Gordon.

**Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Sorry, Mr Speaker. West Yorkshire borders my patch. Will the Minister ensure that a mass transit system in Leeds connects with places such as Harrogate just across the border, so that there is a combined approach for the entire region?

**Simon Lightwood:** I will bear the hon. Member's contribution in mind and share it with colleagues in the West Yorkshire combined authority.

**Mr Speaker:** Let us continue the Yorkshire love-in with shadow Minister Sir Alex Shelbrooke.

**Sir Alec Shelbrooke** (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): Let me say to my near neighbour, the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), that my constituency does not have a train station either. Joining up towns and cities in the north of England is a way to untap this country's great economic potential. As the first ever shadow

Minister for northern transport, and a Yorkshire MP, I am incredibly excited about the mass transit system in Leeds that I have campaigned on for years. Along with the rest of Network North, it will be a transformative endeavour but, unfortunately, Labour has a history of not delivering mass transit projects in Leeds. In fact, it seems the only deliveries it is interested in are boxes of clothes from Lord Alli. What message does that send to the people and businesses of Leeds, whose lives it will improve? Can the Minister put them all out of their misery and confirm that the project is going ahead?

**Simon Lightwood:** Let me remind the hon. Gentleman that the Conservatives were in government for 14 long years. Now, the hon. Gentleman has the temerity to stand there and ask why we are not getting on with it. This Government are moving quick and fixing things. We are determined to work with Tracy Brabin as the Mayor of West Yorkshire to achieve her objectives.

### **Driving Test Waiting Times**

**6. Bambos Charalambous** (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): What steps she is taking to reduce driving test waiting times. [900471]

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Louise Haigh):** Practical driving test waiting times remain far too high after the previous Administration failed to reduce them, limiting would-be drivers' access to opportunities. I have met the chief executive of the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency and driving test examiners, and I have instructed my officials to work at pace to identify solutions to this pervasive problem.

**Bambos Charalambous:** I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has met the chief executive of the DVSA to discuss urgent solutions to the sky-high driving test waiting times. According to the latest statistics, the waiting time in the Wood Green driving test centre in my constituency was 18.64 weeks. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that this issue is a top priority for the Government, so that my constituents can be reassured that driving test waiting times will be drastically reduced?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Can I just say to Members who have been here a long time, please speak to the Chair? They should be speaking through a third party, not directly. I am trying to take some of the anger out of it. Please work with me on that.

**Louise Haigh:** I am very grateful to you, Mr Speaker, as I am to my hon. Friend for raising that important question. He is absolute right. Average waiting times at the Wood Green centre currently sit just above the national average. The measures that the DVSA is already taking to reduce waiting times include conducting tests outside regular hours, at weekends and on public holidays, and continuing to deploy examiners from areas with lower waiting times. That is in addition to producing additional examiners across the country in areas where waiting times are highest. We will soon set out to the House further steps by which we will bring down waiting times further.



**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State very much for that response. Waiting times for tests continue to be a problem. What assessment has been made of the knock-on effect that could occur with the validity of theory tests should delays in practical tests remain and not improve?

**Louise Haigh:** I am very grateful to the hon. Member for raising that important issue. I will take it away and write to him.

#### **Maritime Coastguard Agency: Safety Breaches**

7. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What discussions she has had with the Maritime and Coastguard Agency on maritime safety breaches which occur outside UK territorial waters but within the exclusive economic zone. [900472]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane):** The Secretary of State has met the chief executive of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, and this matter was discussed. The MCA will continue to monitor this important issue, as well as follow up on the actions already taken since the Westminster Hall debate on maritime safety last April.

**Mr Carmichael:** If we continue to see this as a matter of legality, nothing will ever change, and certainly not in any decent timeframe. We have to focus on what we can do practically to end the sort of attacks that trawlers from Shetland, such as the *Alison Kay* and *Defiant*, have been subject to in recent years. Will the Minister look at the experience of authorities in Ireland, who have managed to tackle the reckless conduct of trawlers like the *Pesorsa Dos* and keep their fishermen safe?

**Mike Kane:** I will undertake to look at the authorities in Ireland. I had a recent visit to the Orkney Islands in the right hon. Member's constituency. I would wish to catch up with him about that and I am happy to meet him to discuss this matter further.

#### **Midland Main Line: Electrification**

8. **Catherine Atkinson** (Derby North) (Lab): What recent progress has been made on the electrification of the midland main line. [900473]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood):** Electrification is progressing on the midland main line, with the new overhead line equipment from Kettering to Wigston, just south of Leicester, now installed and energised. That, together with enhancements to overhead line equipment south of Bedford, will enable new bi-mode trains to run electric from St Pancras to Wigston from 2025.

**Catherine Atkinson:** The full electrification of the midland main line would significantly reduce railway operating costs and cut 42,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide annually. Current work on the line will finish soon. Moving ahead with the rest of the project would retain the multidisciplinary skills and supply chain needed for rail electrification in the UK. The Department has

already given us so much good news for rail, so can the Minister give us some more good news on this very important question?

**Lilian Greenwood:** I commend my hon. Friend's support for this scheme, and for being such a champion of the railways and her constituents. I assure her that delivering greener transport is one of the Secretary of State's priorities for our Department. The extension of the electrification from Wigston to Nottingham, and to Sheffield via Derby, is in development and is planned to be completed by the early 2030s, subject to business case approvals and affordability considerations.

**Dame Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): It is not electrified, Mr Speaker, but the west midlands railway line from Birmingham to Hereford has seen a dramatic deterioration in its performance since the Secretary of State agreed the no-conditions, inflation-busting pay rise with the strikers. Will the Minister agree to meet the management of West Midlands Railway to see what steps could be taken to improve the performance on that important line?

**Lilian Greenwood:** There have already been improvements in performance and a reduction in cancellations on the railway. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is working extremely hard to hold operators to account and to ensure that all our constituents enjoy a quality service from the railway. It is essential that we put passengers at the heart of it for the first time in a very long time.

#### **Cornwall and Isles of Scilly: Transport Needs**

9. **Andrew George** (St Ives) (LD): If she will meet authorities in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly to discuss transport needs in those areas. [900474]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane):** The Government are working apace to improve transport provision throughout the country. We have already announced five strategic transport priorities to improve local transport performance and increase usage. Officials will continue to meet local transport authorities across the south-west to discuss their aspirations.

**Andrew George:** Following the points raised by the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham), may I point out that a great many other challenges have been revealed since the general election? There are worries about expensive school transport and risk-free investment in Cornwall, and there are also worries on the Isles of Scilly, where we seek parity with Scotland and the English mainland in respect of lifeline links to the islands and, indeed, inter-island transport. It would be helpful if, as well as meeting the transport authorities, the Minister could meet local MPs, because these issues are becoming very serious indeed.

**Mike Kane:** All air and sea services are operated commercially, without public subsidy. The Department has provided support, particularly during the pandemic, but its officials are committed to regular engagement with the local council to see how we can improve travel provision on the islands.

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

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The Government's bus reforms are welcome, but rural areas such as Cornwall have perhaps the poorest bus services in England, as well as less well developed partnerships than, say, urban Greater Manchester. What plans do the Government have to ensure that rural areas in England can benefit from better bus services, as cities certainly will following the Government's reforms?

**Mike Kane:** My hon. Friend is an incredible campaigner on transport matters, not just in her constituency but across the country. It is true that rural communities face different challenges, but the Government's better buses Bill will enable local authorities to take back control of our buses and improve services, where they wish to do so.

### Local Bus Services

10. **Paul Davies** (Colne Valley) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve local bus services. [900475]

11. **Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve local bus services. [900476]

17. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve local bus services. [900483]

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Louise Haigh):** The state of the country's bus services is too often unacceptably poor after more than a decade of neglect and decline. Politicians in my position have neglected them for too long, and it shows. In September we moved fast and announced transformative new measures to make it quicker and easier for every local authority in England to have London-style control over its bus services.

**Paul Davies:** Public transport is crucial for rural communities, connecting residents to essential services. However, between 2011 and 2023 England saw a 20% reduction in bus services, with a 28% per capita decrease when the figure was adjusted for population growth. That decline has had a severe impact on rural areas such as my constituency, leaving many residents isolated and struggling to gain access to education, employment, healthcare and social activities. Can the Secretary of State tell me how the better buses Bill will improve the position for my constituents?

**Louise Haigh:** I am aware of the premium that my hon. Friend places on public transport. Indeed, I have campaigned along with him, in his beautiful constituency. I am delighted to confirm that we will introduce a new buses Bill this year to give local leaders the tools that they need to ensure the delivery of high-quality bus networks, putting decision making into their hands and seriously accelerating the franchising process.

**Mary Kelly Foy:** Bus services in the city of Durham are an absolute headache for my constituents. Buses are often 45 minutes late in villages such as West Drayton. The Labour Mayor of the North East and I want to

crack on and deliver our manifesto promise to bring buses back into public control. Can the Secretary of State assure me that the better buses Bill will allow us to enfranchise buses sooner rather than later, and will she meet the Mayor and me discuss the bus situation in Durham?

**Louise Haigh:** I am grateful for my hon. Friend's question. The better buses Bill is designed exactly to help authorities such as the North East combined authority. I have met the Mayor, as has the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood), who has responsibility for local transport, on a number of occasions to discuss how we can ensure that the franchising process is sped up so that we can deliver better bus services much more quickly for my hon. Friend's constituents. I am sure the local transport Minister would be delighted to meet both my hon. Friend and the Mayor.

**Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): My right hon. Friend knows that when the previous Government axed over 1,000 bus routes, local communities were completely ignored. As she rebuilds our bus network, can she assure me that the better buses Bill will make provision to fully include local voices, not just the voices of those in elected positions?

**Louise Haigh:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has put her finger on exactly the problem with the system across the country at the moment. For too long, we have allowed private operators to pick and choose whatever routes and services they want, with no say whatsoever for local people or local leaders. The better buses Bill is at the heart of our bus service reforms, and it will give local people a proper say on the routes and services that they absolutely depend on.

**Ben Obese-Jecty** (Huntingdon) (Con): In my constituency of Huntingdon, eight villages receive no bus services whatsoever, including Molesworth, where we will shortly see a half a billion pound investment in upgrading and expanding our defence infrastructure at RAF Molesworth. Given that franchising will potentially be introduced in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss how we can guarantee that our rural villages are given the focus they urgently need?

**Louise Haigh:** The hon. Gentleman has made the case for franchising. It is totally unacceptable that entire villages are cut off, without the bus services that they absolutely need. That denies people the opportunity to move around their area and get to work or education opportunities. The Mayor of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough is pursuing franchising. We are supporting him in those efforts, and we will make sure that villages such as those in the hon. Gentleman's constituency are properly included in the franchising process.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I wonder if the right hon. Lady can see the irony in the fact that the new bus system that she is so excited about introducing is broadly the same as the train system that she is busy dismantling. The simple truth is that without

funding, the Government's plan will not make struggling bus services viable or affordable for passengers. What has helped is our £2 fare cap, which has saved millions of people money and helped to keep local buses going, especially in rural areas. Does the Secretary of State agree that the £2 fare cap has been a good thing and, crucially, is she going to keep it?

**Louise Haigh:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right to suggest that the underfunding of bus services over a decade has led to the cancellation and scrapping of thousands of bus routes across the country, and passenger numbers have fallen over the last 40 years. We are committed to consolidating funding and ending the "Hunger Games" style process that the previous Government oversaw, which pitted authorities against each other and created winners and losers.

### Walking and Cycling

12. **Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): What steps she is taking to promote walking and cycling. [900478]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood):** This Government recognise the huge benefits of walking and cycling. They support our economic growth, health and net zero missions by helping to revitalise high streets, improve air quality and support people in living longer, healthier lives. This Government will embrace green and healthy transport choices, and we will set out ambitious plans to promote safer, greener and healthier journeys as part of an integrated transport strategy.

**Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): Barriers to active travel are many, including old footbridges that are needed for crossing railways. In my constituency of Wokingham, Network Rail is in the process of replacing the footbridge at the Tan House crossing. Despite an offer from the local authority to contribute towards the cost of making the bridge accessible to all, Network Rail has insisted on spending millions of pounds to build a bridge that many people will never be able to use. Can the Minister review with Network Rail why it believes that it is not required to make its estate accessible to all, and take steps to ensure that it is required to do so in future?

**Simon Lightwood:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I will refer this matter to the Minister with responsibility for rail, and will write to the hon. Gentleman with further information.

**Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): E-scooters offer an excellent opportunity for promoting active travel, but many of my constituents are concerned about the speed at which people travel on them. Will the Minister confirm that the Government's road safety strategy will look at e-scooters, so that we can make sure that they are a safe part of our active travel system?

**Simon Lightwood:** We believe that micro-mobility has a vital role to play in an integrated transport system. We are looking very carefully at the e-scooter trial areas across the country, and will look at what further steps we can take to push forward this agenda.

**Josh Babarinde** (Eastbourne) (LD): My constituent Alex suffered a life-changing cycling accident at the hands of an untraced driver, and is now battling with the Motor Insurers' Bureau to get the compensation he deserves. The bureau's delays in providing compensation are intolerable, and are undermining his confidence to cycle again. Will the Secretary of State or the Minister meet me to discuss Alex's case, and how the bureau can be reformed to restore cyclists' confidence in the system?

**Simon Lightwood:** I would be delighted to arrange that meeting.

### City Regions: Connectivity

13. **Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to improve transport connectivity within city regions. [900479]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood):** Up again! The Government are making a five-year, £5.7 billion investment to improve the transport networks of eight city regions between 2022-23 to 2026-27 through the city region sustainable transport settlements. We have announced plans to introduce an English devolution Bill, which, alongside our major bus and rail reforms, will equip mayors with the powers and influence that they need to create an integrated local transport network and improve local transport in their area, in line with the Government's missions.

**Lisa Smart:** When my constituents in Hazel Grove travel to the centre of the city region, they can use the train service—subject to landslide issues and, of course, the whims of the train operating companies—but when they are moving around my constituency, they must rely on the bus network. Can the Minister give the Greater Manchester combined authority and my residents clarity about funding for the bus model in Greater Manchester, so that it is not the 10 constituent local authorities who are burdened with paying the price for keeping the £2 bus fare cap?

**Simon Lightwood:** I am proudly wearing my Bee Network badge this morning, having visited Greater Manchester to meet the operators of the Bee Network and Mayor Andy Burnham; that is trailblazing work in Greater Manchester. In the year in which the network has been operating, we have already seen a 5% increase in passenger numbers, and buses are turning up on time, which is always great. The question of funding for the future will of course be part of the spending review.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): I was reading the Treasury's "Fixing the foundations" document, and I understand that because of the need to restore control over public spending, the Government have had to cancel the restoring your railway programme. However, I note that individual projects will be reconsidered in the Transport Secretary's review. Will the Minister please look at the development of the Abertillery spur on the Ebbw Vale to Cardiff line, as he considers good-value investment and connectivity in our railways infrastructure?



**Simon Lightwood:** The Government are reviewing a number of infrastructure projects in the light of the terrible financial situation that we find ourselves in, following the terrible damage inflicted on this country by the Opposition.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Mr Paul Kohler** (Wimbledon) (LD): In London, connectivity is provided by Transport for London, but in my constituency of Wimbledon, despite its wonderful tube, tram, train and bus connections, my constituents suffer from repeated track and signal failures on the District line, while South Western Railway is labouring with ageing rolling stock and decreased frequency of service at stations such as Malden Manor and Worcester Park. What are the Government planning to do to address the capital funding crisis that they inherited from the Tories across London's transport system, and will the Minister meet me to discuss the problems affecting the District line and South Western trains?

**Simon Lightwood:** The Government remain committed to supporting London and the transport network on which it depends. We are working with the Mayor of London on funding plans for transport in the capital, to provide value for money and lasting benefits to the public. I would, of course, be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss these matters.

#### Active Travel: Sustrans Modelling

14. **Seamus Logan** (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): If she will have discussions with Sustrans on the potential role of its tool for modelling and forecasting cycling levels in the promotion of active travel. [900480]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood):** So many questions! As the executive agency responsible for walking, wheeling and cycling, Active Travel England is investigating how to improve the modelling and forecasting of cycling levels to ensure that we invest appropriately. I have asked its officers to meet Sustrans colleagues to discuss the potential benefits of its tool.

**Seamus Logan:** The brilliant cycle to work scheme runs across the four nations of these islands, but under current rules, it cannot be used by people who earn less than £17,000 a year. This almost certainly contributes to the fact that only 30% of people on lower incomes have access to a cycle, compared with 59% of people on higher incomes—that is almost double. Various solutions have been proposed, including the Sustrans suggestion of a voucher giving 40% off the cost of a bike. Can the Minister do anything to address this unfair situation, and to help our national Governments support people on lower incomes who would like to be able to take advantage of the cycle to work scheme?

**Simon Lightwood:** I recognise the problems with the scheme, and I will work closely with Treasury colleagues on this matter. I was delighted to attend the launch of the Sustrans report in the Palace a couple of weeks ago, and I will pay careful attention to its recommendations.

#### Regional Airports

15. **Noah Law** (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure the resilience of regional airports. [900481]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane):** Although airports are responsible for their own resilience and financial plans, the Department continues to engage with the industry to ensure that operations are as resilient as possible. Furthermore, my officials are actively exploring opportunities for improving the resilience of the sector.

**Noah Law:** Aviation at Cornwall airport, Newquay, is under threat from increasing regulatory burdens, leading its owner, Cornwall council, to explore costly funding options that could put this aviation business on an even less stable footing, despite its clear benefit to the public good and the local economy. Will the Minister outline the steps being taken to ensure that there is an adequate strategy in place to support airports in meeting these increasing regulatory burdens?

**Mike Kane:** As my hon. Friend knows, the UK aviation market predominantly operates in the private sector, and regulatory costs are common to several industries. My Department is working with the aviation industry to understand the impact of these costs, and I am sure he will continue to champion the public service obligation route between Newquay and London, which enables more passengers to use Newquay airport.

#### Capital Investment

18. **Graham Leadbitter** (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): Whether she has had discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on increasing capital investment in transport. [900484]

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Louise Haigh):** As the Chancellor set out in her statement, this Government inherited a £22 billion fiscal black hole, including billions of pounds of underfunded and unfunded transport projects. We must fix the foundations of the economy, so I am reviewing capital expenditure in transport to ensure that every penny is spent responsibly, to get the best value for money, and to ensure that our investment powers growth in every corner of the country.

**Graham Leadbitter:** The Secretary of State will be aware of the ambitions of Scotland and the other devolved nations when it comes to major capital transport schemes. However, she will also be aware of the swingeing cuts made to capital budgets by the previous Tory Government, while construction inflation has risen to eye-watering levels. Will she ensure that capital funding for transport projects is substantially increased to enable work on vital connectivities to progress at pace?

**Louise Haigh:** I have met the Scottish Transport Minister, Fiona Hyslop, and look forward to a constructive working relationship with her. The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that spending commitments are a matter for the spending review, but those negotiations and discussions are ongoing.

**Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): As a result of under-investment in the lower Thames crossing project, Dartford residents face a noxious cocktail of bad air quality and disruption, living as they do near the hugely over capacity Dartford crossing. Will my right hon. Friend consider making representations to the Treasury to ensure that the lower Thames crossing, which is a vital infrastructure project, is funded?

**Louise Haigh:** The decision around the development consent order for the lower Thames crossing is a quasi-judicial one. I am afraid I am unable to comment further than my written ministerial statement this week.

#### Publicly-controlled Bus Services: Ringfenced Funding

19. **Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): If she will take steps with Cabinet colleagues to ensure the provision of ringfenced funding for local authorities to deliver publicly-controlled bus services. [900485]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood):** As part of our plan to deliver better bus services, the Government have committed to reforming bus funding by giving local authorities the tools they need to ensure services reflect the needs of the communities they serve. We want to give local leaders more control and flexibility over bus funding, and allow them to plan ahead to deliver their local transport priorities. We are considering how best to support buses in the longer term as part of the spending review.

**Ian Lavery:** The Government's better buses Bill is a fantastic example of what a Labour Government can achieve and do. For the Bill to be successful, if funding is made available, we must ensure bus drivers are paid adequately and local residents have an input into the design, regularity and quality of routes. Will the Minister confirm that that will form part of the Bill and that this Labour Government will end the Tories' 14-year ideological war on municipal transport?

**Simon Lightwood:** I agree with my hon. Friend. I reassure him that we are committed to delivering better bus services and that we will always put passengers first. Our forthcoming bus Bill is a crucial part of our reforms. When it is introduced later in this Session, it will increase powers available to local leaders, because those local leaders are best placed to make decisions on their bus networks, and remove the Conservatives' ideological ban on municipal bus companies.

#### Rural Transport Links

20. **Patrick Spencer** (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to improve transport links in rural areas. [900486]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood):** The Government know that Britain needs a modern transport network to help kickstart economic growth. Under the previous Government, the loss of thousands of vital bus services across the country has left too many rural areas with poor transport links. That is why the Government will be introducing a new buses Bill to put power over local services back in the hands of local leaders right across England, to ensure

networks can meet the needs of the communities that rely on them, including in Suffolk and other rural areas in England.

**Patrick Spencer:** While I welcome the news that this Government plan to deliver 1,200 UK-made zero-emission buses to help local authorities deliver on their transport ambitions and seize opportunities to embrace zero-emissions transport technology, may I ask what consideration the Secretary of State and her Department have given to the much-needed expansion of electric vehicle charging networks in rural communities, specifically those in central Suffolk, to support the roll-out of the electric fleet?

**Simon Lightwood:** We will be making an announcement soon on that expansion.

#### Topical Questions

T1. [900516] **David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Louise Haigh):** I pledged to move fast and fix things, and that is exactly what my Department is doing. Not only have we ended the longest ever national strike on our railways, saving the taxpayer millions and boosting our economy, we have passed a landmark Bill through this House to bring rail services back into public hands after decades of failure and fragmentation. We are taking back control of buses by providing new powers to deliver control to every community in England. We have taken a step closer to greener flights, with a new sustainable aviation fuel mandate. Just yesterday, I announced new measures to strengthen working rights at sea and prevent a repeat of the P&O Ferries scandal ever happening again.

Transport is powering the crucial work of repair and renewal. It underpins each of our national missions, from economic growth to clean energy, and under this Government it will serve working people, wherever they live.

**David Simmonds:** My constituent, Frederick Cooksley, was sent a fine by the Mayor of London for breaching the ultra low emission zone rules, despite driving on a road where the ULEZ does not apply, which provides access to a very important hospital in my constituency. Will she prevail upon her colleague the Mayor of London to ensure, unlike Mr Cooksley, who had to challenge at great length to get his money back, that everyone who has been issued a fine in error for driving on a road where the rules do not apply is automatically refunded?

**Louise Haigh:** I am sure the Mayor of London will have heard that question. We will pass on issues around fining on roads where the ULEZ does not apply.

T2. [900517] **Jen Craft** (Thurrock) (Lab): At best, the proposed lower Thames crossing offers only a short-term mitigation to the problem of congestion at the Dartford crossing, but will have a significantly detrimental environmental and quality-of-life impact for my constituents and feels counterintuitive to the Government's net zero ambitions. Given that, what steps will the Secretary of State take to consider the potential for investment in cross-river public transport, including the KenEx tram scheme—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am sorry, but this is topical. It was a bad example to begin with, but do not make it worse. I am sure that you are coming to the end of your question now.

**Jen Craft:** What steps will the Secretary of State take to consider cross-river public transport?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood):** I thank my hon. Friend for her question and completely understand the concerns that she raises about congestion in the area. The outlined business case submitted by KenEx, to which she refers, was unfortunately unable to progress further after its submission in 2022, as it lacked critical detail. Should alternatives be brought forward, I am sure that they will be considered.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con):** After just 100 days, this is already one of the most anti-growth Governments in history, from investor-scaring taxes to the right hon. Lady hitting the brakes on our transport infrastructure pipeline, with Northern Powerhouse Rail, the Midlands Rail Hub and road upgrades across the country all on hold. Growth requires investment and investment requires confidence. Will she give some to the businesses looking to invest, to the contractors waiting to get started, and, crucially, to the communities that so badly need these upgrades?

**Louise Haigh:** I wonder whether the hon. Lady has spoken to any businesses or infrastructure providers over the past 14 years who have suffered appalling uncertainty and a lack of confidence. Her Government presided over billions of pounds of waste and failure in the delivery of infrastructure and have cost our economy hundreds of billions of pounds.

**Helen Whately:** I was expecting the right hon. Lady to say something along the lines of “wait for the Budget”, or “wait for the spending review”, as we have heard many times during this question session. However, she did not wait for the Budget to give unions a massive pay rise, to re-announce our plan to get HS2 to Euston, or to signal billions of pounds for a new HS2-light. If she can make those decisions before the Budget, surely she can confirm that every penny of investment that we had committed to transport through Network North will continue to be invested in our country’s transport infrastructure.

**Louise Haigh:** The hon. Lady can wait for the Budget!

T3. [900518] **Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab):** Dangerous driving is a major concern, particularly following a serious crash in my constituency last week. With West Midlands police committed to Vision Zero, what additional support is the Department for Transport providing to help local enforcement and campaigns to tackle speeding and other dangerous driving behaviours?

**Lilian Greenwood:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that vital question. Every death on our roads is a tragedy. We expect drivers to observe the speed limit,

and, of course, enforcement is a matter for the police. Last week, I met Richard Parker, the Mayor of the west midlands, to discuss our shared determination to improve road safety.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesman.

**Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD):** I congratulate the Secretary of State on saying recently that it is ridiculous for HS2 to end at Old Oak Common. Can she confirm whether funding for the work necessary at Euston station has now been secured and what she is doing to reverse the Tories’ equally absurd decision to end the northern leg at Birmingham?

**Louise Haigh:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. As I said earlier, nowhere is the legacy of the previous Government more pertinent than the mess in which they left HS2. Even under their disgraced plans, Euston was always going to be part of the position on HS2, and we will shortly be making a full announcement about the future of HS2 and, crucially, about its cost controls.

T7. [900522] **Mary Glendon (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab):** I am pleased to hear that the Secretary of State has said that, unlike the previous hapless Government, she will prevent another scandal such as the sudden sacking of 800 P&O ferry employees two years ago. Will she please outline what steps she intends to take to stop anything like that ever happening again?

**Louise Haigh:** I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. The previous Government took two-and-a-half years after the P&O ferry scandal to do nothing. In fewer than 100 days, we are bringing forward legislation that will prevent such a scandal ever happening again, and we are working with operators who employ properly in this space and the trade unions to bring forward protections on rostering as well.

T4. [900519] **Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con):** The A12 is the major artery between London and the east coast, yet it is already busier than most motorways and suffers from horrendous congestion and delays. Will the Minister therefore press ahead with the widening scheme, which is at an advanced stage, and without which the Government’s projected growth targets and housing targets simply will not be met?

**Lilian Greenwood:** I understand the pressures in relation to the A12, but as the right hon. Member will know, the Secretary of State has announced a review of our Department’s capital portfolio that will support the development of our long-term strategy for transport, and of course there is a Budget and a spending review coming up.

T8. [900523] **Lauren Edwards (Rochester and Strood) (Lab):** Eurostar services have not called at Ashford or Ebbsfleet international rail stations since the pandemic, with Eurostar stating that it will not resume services for some years. That is having a really detrimental impact on businesses and residents in my constituency, and more broadly across Medway and Kent. Will the Secretary of State meet me, other interested MPs and representatives



from the Kent and Medway economic partnership to discuss options to restore this vital rail service and help to boost economic growth in the region?

**Louise Haigh:** I am grateful for my hon. Friend's important question. We share her and her constituents' disappointment in the commercial decision by Eurostar to cease services. We hope to see a reinstatement, either by Eurostar or another operator, in the future, but I will meet with her, other MPs and local stakeholders to continue discussing this matter.

T5. [900520] **Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): Government allocations to local highway authorities for road maintenance have been frozen since 2016, with no funding for new roads since 2012. My constituency has lost over half its funding. Will the Minister urgently investigate how road maintenance funding for local authorities can be restored?

**Lilian Greenwood:** There is no greater sign of the failure of the previous Government than the appalling state of our roads. That is why this Government have already committed to supporting local authorities across England to fix up to 1 million extra potholes every year. We will have more to say on this in due course.

T9. [900525] **Steve Race** (Exeter) (Lab): Exeter has a good and well used rail system that is vital for the economic and social success of our city; however, two of our stations—St Thomas and Polsloe Bridge—are accessible only to people who can climb flights of stairs. Will the Minister please update the House on the work that the Government are undertaking to ensure that our rail network is accessible to everyone?

**Lilian Greenwood:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising the important issue of accessibility. We are carefully considering the best approach to the Access for All programme. I am afraid that we are not yet able to comment on next steps regarding projects at specific stations; however, ensuring that the rail network is accessible to absolutely everyone is at the heart of our passenger-focused approach, and I will speak to him about it further.

T6. [900521] **Siân Berry** (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): Has the Minister's capital portfolio review properly considered the health, social and equalities aspects of value for money, and will it therefore recommend cancelling more road building schemes from the previous Government in favour of a real long-term boost to local authority active travel funding?

**Louise Haigh:** The capital review and our assessment of the transport appraisal guidance are absolutely considering how we can capture better the wider implications of transport infrastructure funding. We are committed to working with Active Travel England and ensuring that all investment involves consideration of how we can better promote active travel and public transport use, but we are committed to road building as well.

**Sojan Joseph** (Ashford) (Lab): The deployment of Operation Brock to queue freight lorries heading to Dover on the M20 caused huge disruption and

inconvenience for residents and businesses throughout my Ashford constituency. Ahead of the introduction of the new EU entry/exit system, will the Government work with the French Government, local authorities, the port of Dover, and Eurotunnel to minimise delays and ensure that Operation Brock is used only as a measure of last resort?

**Lilian Greenwood:** Both the Secretary of State and I have visited Kent a number of times in recent weeks and months. We meet regularly with our colleagues in the Home Office, the Cabinet Office and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to discuss the impacts of the new EU entry/exit system, and we will intensify those discussions as we approach the implementation date.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Father of the House.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): The previous Minister promised me and my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) that he had instructed LNER and Network Rail to ensure that we get our through train from Grimsby to London. Will the Minister confirm that she will continue those firm instructions and, above all, ensure that this train stops? If it does not stop in Market Rasen, I am going to lie down on the line and stop it that way.

**Lilian Greenwood:** I do hope that the right hon. Member will not put himself in such danger. We are working with industry to address timetabling, financial, operational and infrastructure issues that need to be resolved before a service between Cleethorpes and London via Market Rasen could be introduced, once the east coast main line timetable change has been implemented. We will consider any proposals put forward, with approval subject to funding and a thorough business case process.

**Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): One of the final acts of the last Tory Government was to cancel Access for All funding for Battersea Park station in my constituency, despite there being a costed plan in place with the local authority. The funding has been promised for more than a decade. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can get the project back on track and finally make Battersea Park station step-free?

**Louise Haigh:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has been campaigning on this issue since the moment she set foot in this House. I would be delighted to meet her to see how we can take forward this important project.

**Victoria Collins** (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Local people in Harpenden and Berkhamsted are already blighted by noise from Luton airport, and are highly concerned about the proposed expansion to almost double passenger capacity. What assessment has the Minister made of the compatibility of the expansion with the views of the Government's own advisers, the Climate Change Committee?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane):** Currently, Luton airport is part of a development consent order, on which I cannot comment as a Minister, but I would remind people that it is always important to balance noise and local economic activity.



**Matt Rodda** (Reading Central) (Lab): Twenty-five years ago, two trains collided just west of Paddington station, in what was one of worst rail accidents of recent times. Thirty-one people lost their lives and many more were injured. Will the Secretary of State join me in paying tribute to all those who were affected by the Paddington rail crash?

**Louise Haigh:** I commend my hon. Friend for his bravery in recently speaking out about his personal involvement in that tragic crash, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) and my officials for attending the commemoration last weekend. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda) in paying tribute to the families of the victims and to all those heroes who responded on the day.

**Luke Taylor** (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): Residents in my constituency have been in contact about services at Worcester Park, which have been cut dramatically over the past few years, as has already been alluded to by my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler). One resident complains that prices have gone up by 20% in the past five years, and that the last train has been brought back from almost 1 am to before midnight. This is not only throttling London's night-time economy, but causing issues for local residents who choose more sustainable transport. Will the Minister explain when we can expect to see improvements in services following renationalisation, which may begin as early as next year?

**Louise Haigh:** The hon. Member has outlined exactly the kind of issues that we seek to address through the public ownership reforms and the creation of Great British Railways. The Department is already working with operators that are in public ownership and those that are not yet, such as Southern, to ensure that the decisions that they make are properly joined up with Network Rail and that we can start driving improvements immediately.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): As a result of a failure in regulation, the cross-border taxi trade is undermining the high standards set by local taxi companies and black cabs. What is being done to improve regulation, and will the Minister meet me to discuss the situation in York?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood):** We are aware of concerns about the current legislative and regulatory framework and would be delighted to meet her to discuss that further.

**Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The previous Government introduced the "get around for £2" bus fare, which was committed to for five years in the Conservative manifesto. Given that—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Face this way, please. Questions should be asked through me, not addressed directly to the Minister.

**Mr Holden:** Of course, Mr Speaker. Will the Government commit to extending the fare until at least the end of this financial year? It is so important for rural bus users and for lower-paid workers accessing employment right across the country.

**Simon Lightwood:** We are considering the benefits that have accrued as a result of the £2 bus fare and what steps we will take next. Of course, that will all form part of the spending review.

**Dr Lauren Sullivan** (Gravesham) (Lab): While the lower Thames crossing is under review, what steps is the Secretary of State taking to promote river transport crossings such as river buses?

**Lilian Greenwood:** I will ask my officials to look into river buses, and I will write to my hon. Friend after today's session.

**John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): The A36 is a critical route between Southampton and Bath/Bristol. A study was completed several months ago. Given the decision on the A303 tunnel just north of Salisbury, will the appropriate Minister meet me so that we can discuss connectivity and remove the pinch-point on the Southampton Road south of Salisbury on the A36?

**Lilian Greenwood:** I would be very happy to meet the right hon. Member to discuss that.

**Daniel Francis** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): I pay tribute to the "Rights on Flights" campaign for the work that it is doing to improve accessibility, particularly for wheelchair users. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to improve aviation accessibility for disabled people?

**Louise Haigh:** I met the "Rights on Flights" campaign early on after becoming Secretary of State. We will set out our plans to address the major issue of aviation accessibility shortly.

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The last Conservative Government ringfenced funding to the West Midlands Combined Authority for the delivery of a train station in Aldridge. Can the Secretary of State confirm that that is proceeding as planned and will be delivered by 2027, or has she signed away our ringfenced funding in favour of a wider Transport for West Midlands budget in order to support the Labour Mayor's ideologically driven plan for bus nationalisation?

**Louise Haigh:** The West Midlands Mayor's plan for bus services across the west midlands are predicated on delivering better bus services and transport across the region as a whole. We will look into where the funding is for the Aldridge train station.

**Martin Vickers** (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's decision to approve the new roll-on, roll-off shipping terminal at Immingham. However, as she will be aware, it will put more pressure on the local road network, particularly the A180. Will she bring forward improvements to the A180, particularly the removal of the concrete surfaces? Long term, we really need the A180 to be upgraded to motorway status.

**Louise Haigh:** I have heard all about the A180 from the hon. Gentleman, and from my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn), so I know about the issues that it is causing his constituents. We will write to him with a National Highways update.

**Manuela Perteghella** (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): The town of Stratford-upon-Avon is one of the most visited locations in the UK, yet for many years we have not had a direct train to the capital. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to fix the lack of capacity in Chiltern Railways so that my constituents and visitors can travel directly and sustainably to and from London?

**Louise Haigh:** That sort of service and provision is exactly what the reforms around Great British Railways are designed to address. Decisions around infrastructure and operations will be made together so that we can deliver services that make sense for the hon. Lady's constituents, for visitors and for the economy as a whole.

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): One hundred and fifty parishes in Devon wrote to Devon county council last year asking for 20 mph zones, but only six were successful. Those that were not successful were told that they could pursue the measure through so-called "community self-delivery." My constituents think, "But this is what we pay our council tax for." Does the Secretary of State understand that?

**Louise Haigh:** I am very grateful for the hon. Gentleman's question. It is absolutely my position that if local residents want to design and support local measures around speeding and road safety, they should be supported to do so by their local authorities.

## Universities: Freedom of Speech

10.40 am

**Damian Hinds** (East Hampshire) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State if she will make a statement on freedom of speech in universities.

**The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell)**: It was a Labour Government who enshrined in law the right to freedom of expression, and it is a Labour Government who will again uphold freedom of speech and academic freedom on our university campuses—not through creating a culture war, but through working with academics, students and campaigners to get the legislation right.

The Secretary of State wrote to colleagues and made a written statement on 26 July 2024 on her decision to pause further commencement of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 in order to consider options. We have heard concerns from minority groups and others that that Act and its implementation may have unintended consequences and result in disproportionate burdens for universities and student unions. Many are concerned that it could push providers to overlook the safety and wellbeing of minority groups over fears of sanction and costly action.

I want to provide the House with reassurance that this Government believe that higher education must be a space for robust discussion that exposes both students and academics to challenging ideas. The decision to pause the Act was made precisely because of the importance of getting this legislation right. The Secretary of State indicated in her written statement that she would confirm her long-term plans for the Act “as soon as possible”. Since then, officials and Ministers have engaged with a wide range of stakeholders on the future of the Act. This includes representatives of higher education providers and academics, including those from the Committee for Academic Freedom, Academics for Academic Freedom and the London Universities’ Council for Academic Freedom. Those officials and Ministers will continue to engage with stakeholders before any final decision is made.

**Mr Speaker**: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Damian Hinds**: This evening, a Member of this House was due to speak at an event at Cambridge University. That event will not go ahead as planned because of safety concerns. It is absolutely not for us to question operational decision making, but it absolutely is for us to question this Government about legislation and the effects—direct, indirect and chilling—of the decisions they have made since coming to office.

Last year, the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act became law. In the end, having attracted cross-party support after extensive working with students and academics, it passed all its stages in Parliament and received Royal Assent. That Act is about protecting free speech on campus, including for visiting speakers, and it is about academic freedom to challenge conventional wisdom and put forward unpopular and controversial opinions. However, in July this year, the new Secretary of State decided—without any parliamentary debate—not to commence that Act.

The Minister speaks about a wide range of stakeholders. Some 600 academics, including seven Nobel prize laureates, have written to the Secretary of State in support of the legislation. Does the Secretary of State really think that those academics would support that legislation if it was, as the Government put it, a Tory hate charter? Will she now agree to meet those academics, and will she please now do the right thing and commence the legislation that Parliament has passed?

**Catherine McKinnell**: This Government are absolutely committed to freedom of speech. The Secretary of State paused the further implementation of the Act to consider options and ensure we get the legislation right, and she will confirm as soon as possible the plans for the Act and long-term plans for the continuation of freedom of speech in higher education. The higher education sector, minority groups, and unions representing staff on campus have raised concerns about the Act, believing it to be disproportionate, burdensome and damaging to the welfare of students, and fear that sanctions could result in minority groups’ concerns being overlooked. MPs and peers raised a whole range of these concerns during the Bill’s passage. By stepping back from the legislation to reflect on which of the measures introduced are needed, the Government are taking a pragmatic approach to ensuring that higher education remains a space for constructive dialogue and a home for diverse opinions. It should not be a battleground for ideological clashes.

We are considering the next steps. I take on board the shadow Secretary of State’s request for the Secretary of State to meet those he mentioned. She has held a range of meetings with all groups that have concerns and want a say in how this consideration continues. I am sure that she will have further meetings and I will pass on his specific request.

**Graham Stringer** (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): Universities and academic freedom are vital to the intellectual and economic health of this country. Free speech was mentioned in our manifesto earlier this year, but there was no mention of this particular decision, which was made 21 days after the Secretary of State took office. Sadly, I therefore find it difficult to support this decision, on that basis alone. Can the Minister tell me whether, when she talks about burdensome issues, she means the Chinese Government threatening to withdraw resources from our major universities, because I think that is at the bottom of the pressure that was unduly put on the Secretary of State?

**Catherine McKinnell**: I have heard my hon. Friend and recognise his point. However, I can absolutely reassure him that that was not a factor in making this decision. It is very much about ensuring that we take the time to consider options for the future of this Act and make sure that we get it right. It is because we believe in upholding freedom of expression and freedom of speech in our world-class higher education sector that we want to get this legislation right, and that is why we are considering the options. We will continue to listen to and meet all groups that have an interest in upholding freedom of speech. There are those who support measures in the Act and those who have concerns about measures in the Act. We will continue to consult and will report back on plans as soon as possible.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Ian Sollom** (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): Freedom of speech is fundamentally about the freedom to inquire about and explore ideas, facts and data that are sometimes difficult and sometimes inconvenient, and it was the lack of facts and data, and even of much of an idea, that failed to convince the Liberal Democrats of the need for the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act. It was not based on evidence and it was not proportionate, and the Government's decision to halt its implementation is welcome. However, we should take legitimate concerns seriously, and we should not ignore those that exist within Jewish communities, including in universities. What work is the Minister undertaking to ensure that Jewish staff and students feel safe and welcome in our communities, especially in our universities?

**Catherine McKinnell:** I welcome the hon. Gentleman's comments and recognise much within them. The rise in antisemitic abuse on higher education campuses is deeply concerning, and this Government take it extremely seriously. We regularly meet Universities UK to discuss what support universities are offering to Jewish students on campus and how they are tackling antisemitic abuse. We also regularly meet the Union of Jewish Students, the University Jewish Chaplaincy and the Community Security Trust, and we will continue to do so to make sure that we get this right.

**Adam Thompson** (Erewash) (Lab): Can the Minister reflect on the dire inheritance in education, particularly in the higher education sector?

**Catherine McKinnell:** My hon. Friend raises an important point about the wider landscape and the challenges facing our higher education sector. Our universities are not just vital for upholding freedom of expression, freedom of speech, academic debate and rigour; they are also incredible seats of opportunity that must be unleashed up and down this country. We will continue to do everything we can to support economic growth, which we know is supported by higher education, and indeed by the whole of education. The Government are committed to that unleashing of opportunity.

**Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): The Secretary of State has said that she wants to listen to different views and the Minister has talked about the number of meetings that have taken place, so will she commit to meeting the delegation of senior Jewish academics led by Professor David Abulafia, who has already written requesting such a meeting?

**Catherine McKinnell:** The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We are absolutely committed to consulting with a wide range of interests in order to get this legislation right, and I will certainly pass on his request to the Minister with responsibility for higher education, who leads on this work.

**Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the real threat to academic freedom are cuts to academic subjects and job insecurity, two issues that the Conservative party ignored time and again when in government?

**Catherine McKinnell:** My hon. Friend raises an important point, and it goes back to what I said previously: this debate is very important. It is important that we have the right framework for freedom of expression and speech within our education system, and particularly that academic rigour that benefits from having the freedom to be challenged and to challenge views that should be heard and debated. She is also right that universities are the powerhouse to opportunity across the country, and we need to ensure that is unleashed in every part. I am a fellow north-east MP and we know how important our universities are in our region to unleashing that opportunity and we want to see that unleashed across the country.

**Sir Gavin Williamson** (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Mr Speaker, I apologise for my hoarse voice—I have been silenced. The reason that this legislation was brought forward in the first place was that so many academics were fearful of being able to speak in those institutions. They did not believe they had the freedom to express ideas and views, and they were being silenced by other academics. That is why the legislation was brought forward. It is shocking that an Act of Parliament, passed by this House and given Royal Assent, is just to be cast aside without Members of Parliament first having an opportunity to vote on whether they agree with that. Will the hon. Lady therefore commit to giving this House a say on whether that will be allowed to happen?

**Catherine McKinnell:** I commend the right hon. Gentleman for his valiant efforts today to uphold his right to speak on this issue. I recognise the challenge of ensuring that we have taken the time to get this right, because we want to protect freedom of speech and we need to ensure that this legislation, and any legislation, assists in that and does not impede it. We also recognise and support the existing duty on higher education providers to support and secure lawful freedom of speech, as currently set out in the Education Act 1986. It remains in force for Office for Students registration conditions. He is right that we need to get this right; that needs to be upheld, and having this discussion today supports that push to ensure that freedom of speech is upheld. As the Act to which he referred passed through this House and was considered, and as it is now further considered, that sheds more light on the importance of upholding freedom of speech, and he has contributed to that again today.

**Sean Woodcock** (Banbury) (Lab): In the week that we mark the dark anniversary of 7 October, may I say that I welcome this Government taking these measures to ensure the safety of Jewish students on campus? Does the Minister agree that this shows that this Government truly believe that, regardless of their religion, students should be able to get on with their studies without concern for their safety?

**Catherine McKinnell:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and I think that the same principle applies through every aspect of education and childhood, and in every aspect of society too. As a Government, we stand with those upholding and securing those rights.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Our universities have to be an avenue where individuals can speak and be challenged. The reality is that there is nothing new to



freedom of speech. I remember as a president of a students' union constantly having to fight for the right for people to express their views, even when I totally disagreed with them. The sad reality is that Jewish students and Jewish academics feel threatened right now by antisemites—let us call them out for what they are—when they must be free to exercise freedom of speech. Will the Minister, in this consideration, make sure that those rights are upheld in whatever the Government come forward with?

**Catherine McKinnell:** I know that the hon. Gentleman works hard in this space. I do not disagree with a word he has said. Universities must be a space for robust discussion, and that is why we have paused the roll-out of the Act. He is right that antisemitism and Holocaust denial are abhorrent and there must be no space for them. That is why we have paused the legislation. We must ensure that we get the balance right between freedom of speech and upholding the right for minority groups and others to have their lawful right to freedom of expression, as they should.

**Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): Previous Conservative Education Ministers are on the record stating that this flawed legislation could allow those spreading hate and extremism to seek compensation under its measures. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is right that we look again at this issue in order to avoid those dangerous consequences?

**Catherine McKinnell:** My hon. Friend raises an important point, which is why we are currently talking to people with a range of views, including those supportive of the provisions in the Act. We are listening to the concerns of minority groups and others that the Act could encourage universities and colleges to overlook the safety and wellbeing of minorities because of a fear of complaints and costly legal action, pushing them towards allowing abhorrent hate speech. That is why we are considering this legislation. We need to get this right.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): Can the Minister give us any specific examples of a scenario with which the Government were confronted by these people who have successfully lobbied for a pause, other than just speaking in general terms about the legislation being disproportionate?

**Catherine McKinnell:** I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman's thoughtful question. I cannot give him a specific example today. The principle that we are working to is that we are looking in great detail at all aspects and all concerns that have been raised, as well as supportive comments, in relation to the Act and what it seeks to achieve. I will pass his question on to the Minister for higher education and skills and ask her to respond accordingly.

**Mark Ferguson** (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): Student politics is often maligned in this place, and often rightly so. However, in 2006 I attended the conference of the National Union of Students and voted that Hizb ut-Tahrir should be no-platformed. It was the right thing to do. Clearly, the Conservatives agree, because in January this year they proscribed Hizb ut-Tahrir as a terrorist organisation. Does my hon.

Friend agree that the Conservatives' position is in fact a charter for Hizb ut-Tahrir, Holocaust deniers and vaccine deniers to wander our universities freely?

**Catherine McKinnell:** My hon. Friend expresses passionate views on this subject, which does incite passionate views, because it is a fundamental freedom that we must protect and uphold. That is why we are taking the time to ensure that we get this right and uphold lawful freedom of expression and freedom of speech in our higher education system, while not giving space for unlawful speech that goes beyond robust debate.

**Ayoub Khan** (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I recently attended universities in Birmingham and witnessed large protests in relation to the Palestinian issue attended by both people of faith and no faith, including Jewish students. They were protesting peacefully. While we accept that there has been a rise in antisemitism, there has also been a rise in Islamophobic hate at universities. Will the Minister confirm that whatever consultations take place, she will feed back a report on them to the House?

**Catherine McKinnell:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. He is absolutely right. I will make that commitment, which I will pass on to the Minister for Skills and to the Secretary of State.

**Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): Before I was elected to this place, I was a university lecturer and a teacher. I worked hard—as did my colleagues—to ensure that in my lecture hall all views could be expressed, interrogated and debated, even those that I profoundly disagreed with. Does the Minister agree that when Opposition Members make unsubstantiated claims that students who express Tory views are marked down, it undermines—*[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I think that the hon. Members for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) and for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) are both trying to catch my eye. I assure you that that is not the way to do it.

**Peter Swallow:** Does the Minister agree that when Opposition Members make unsubstantiated claims that Tory students are being marked down, it undermines the brilliant hard work that our lecturers do to support their students?

**Catherine McKinnell:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. The Government will uphold freedom of speech and academic freedom on our university campuses. Robust debate and challenge to views helps students to grow in an education setting; creating culture wars does not. That is why we will work with academics, students, campaigners and all those with an interest in upholding freedom of speech in our higher education system to get this right.

**Sir Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): Is freedom of speech not an absolute freedom and right? Will the Government not do something to bring vice-chancellors to account for their failures to deliver freedom of speech on university campuses? Fifty-five years ago, I was the victim of that when the vice-chancellor of the university that I was attending tried to prevent me, as chairman of

[Sir Christopher Chope]

the Conservative association, from inviting a then prominent Member of this House of Commons to the university campus. The vice-chancellor was eventually forced to stand down. I wrote what was then a lead letter in *The Daily Telegraph*, the vice-chancellor was shamed into changing his views and the visit took place. Does that not show that the key to this is having vice-chancellors who really believe in freedom of speech?

**Catherine McKinnell:** The hon. Gentleman has demonstrated well the existing duties on higher education providers to secure lawful freedom of speech and, indeed, the right of citizens to ensure that it is upheld. He makes an important point. That is why we are talking to people with a whole range of views on the issue to ensure that we get it right.

**Josh Fenton-Glynn** (Calder Valley) (Lab): Under the Office for Students' draft guidance, some universities have said they will have to revoke their adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism for fear that it might contravene the legislation. Does my hon. Friend agree that that highlights why it is so important to get the legislation right and that it is right to be cautious about how we implement any such legislation?

**Catherine McKinnell:** My hon. Friend makes the point well. The Department is absolutely committed to upholding the IHRA definition as well as challenging and educating on issues that a range of hon. Members have raised today. We need to have a robust education system that informs and creates healthy debate on these issues, but it must also be lawful and protect the freedom of speech of those expressing lawful views.

**Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Does the Minister believe that cancel culture and no-platforming are a problem? Does she believe they are getting worse? She has mentioned that this is important; why, then, will she not set out a concrete timetable for the introduction of this new legislation?

**Catherine McKinnell:** I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's desire to see these changes. However, we want to take the time to get this right. We are absolutely committed to free speech—I have said that a number of times—and we want to take time to ensure that we protect it in the best way possible.

**Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): If the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act had been implemented, as would have happened under the last Government, to a timetable over the summer, the situation at the University of Cambridge probably would not have occurred, nor would the situation in Durham, in which the university debating society, the Durham Union Society, has been kept out of the students union fair. Would the hon. Lady reflect on the fact that this delay is having an impact on freedom of speech in universities across the country? I understand her concerns, but surely speed is of the essence if we are to ensure freedom of speech in our universities.

**Catherine McKinnell:** I respectfully disagree. Many concerns were expressed that unintended consequences of the Act would create a disproportionate burden, and that is why we have paused it—to step back and to reflect on whether the measures introduced by the Act are needed. We absolutely know that it is necessary to uphold freedom of speech. Provisions on freedom of expression still exist in legislation and will be upheld, and we need to make sure that we have the space to have a constructive dialogue on these issues rather than a battleground for ideological clashes. We are considering the next steps and will report in due course.

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): When the Minister considers whatever comes next after the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act, will she consider the business of foreign funding for international students, their scholarships and research institutes? In particular, will she ensure that no tests or conditions are imposed by other states on international scholarships, bursaries and funding for research institutes?

**Catherine McKinnell:** The hon. Gentleman tempts me into a much broader discussion on higher education. We recognise the challenges, but also the opportunities in this sector. I am sure the Minister for Skills will be listening to the hon. Gentleman's concerns and considering them as part of the wider work on ensuring we support our higher and further education sectors in the best way, which is what they deserve.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister outline how the Government will ensure that enshrining freedom of speech means enshrining freedom to believe and to express one's beliefs without fear or favour? How will the Government ensure that students with deeply held faith or who hold true to biological science are entitled to discuss their beliefs on gender, ideology and indeed every facet of student life without fear or favour?

**Catherine McKinnell:** Yes, I give the hon. Gentleman that reassurance. It is for that reason that we are pausing and making sure that we get this legislation right. Freedom of speech and academic freedom are too important to approach in anything other than a considered, pragmatic and consensual way.

**Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): I appreciate the Minister's constructive tone. She says that she does not want this to be a culture war issue. When the pause was announced by the Secretary of State, special advisers in her Department described the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act to the media as a Tory "hate speech charter". Will the Minister disown those comments?

**Catherine McKinnell:** I have been very clear that we need to take a constructive approach and to listen to all views on this issue. We need to protect freedom of speech and academic expression, and that includes robust debate where necessary and challenging views that we may not want to hear. We are listening and we are determined to get this right.

**Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act is not a Government scheme that is being paused, but an Act

of Parliament that has received Royal Assent. It is a very serious decision to stop that in its tracks, so it must have been based on serious evidence. Will the Minister set out that evidence? Given the need to defend freedom of speech is now, how long will the process take?

**Catherine McKinnell:** I agree that this is a serious issue, and it was a serious and important decision to make. We need to have the right foundations in place to secure free speech in the long term in higher education. We will consult all the groups with an interest in ensuring that we get this right. We are listening to those who are concerned about the Act and its implications. We are also listening to those who supported many of the measures in the Act and would like action to be taken to ensure freedom of speech in higher education. It is because of the seriousness of this issue that we have stepped back, to ensure that we take that pragmatic, long-term approach.

## Business of the House

11.11 am

**Chris Philp** (Croydon South) (Con): Will the Leader of the House update the House on the forthcoming business?

**Mr Speaker:** May I wish the Leader of the House a happy birthday? Forty today!

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell):** Twenty-one today, Mr Speaker.

The business for the week commencing 14 October includes:

MONDAY 14 OCTOBER—Second Reading of the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Bill.

TUESDAY 15 OCTOBER—Second Reading of the House of Lords (Hereditary Peers) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 16 OCTOBER—Opposition day (3rd allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the Liberal Democrats. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 17 OCTOBER—General debate on the international investment summit.

FRIDAY 18 OCTOBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 21 October will include:

MONDAY 21 OCTOBER—Second Reading of the Employment Rights Bill.

TUESDAY 22 OCTOBER—Second Reading of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and International Committee of the Red Cross (Status) Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 23 OCTOBER—Motion to approve the Infected Blood Compensation Scheme Regulations 2024, followed by motion to approve the Iran (Sanctions) (Amendment) Regulations 2024.

THURSDAY 24 OCTOBER—General debate on Black History Month.

FRIDAY 25 OCTOBER—The House will not be sitting.

Additionally, the House may wish to know that I have tabled a motion under future business confirming the upcoming dates for sitting Fridays. Subject to the agreement of the House, the first sitting Friday to consider private Member's Bills will be 29 November.

**Chris Philp:** Mr Speaker, may I start by welcoming your new Chaplain, Rev. Mark Birch, to his role? I am sure we all look forward to working with him. Let me also extend warm birthday wishes to the Leader of the House. It is hard to believe, but today is a very significant birthday for her. The whole House extends warm wishes to her and her family. I am sure there will be a lavish party to mark the occasion, but I am genuinely concerned for the right hon. Lady. To keep up with her Cabinet colleagues, she will need, at a minimum, a personal DJ booth and a luxury penthouse to host the party in. I can see from the look on her face that she is a bit concerned about how she will fund all that. Since it is her birthday, I will give her some free advice: she should not follow the example of her Cabinet colleagues and send the bill to Lord Alli. Anyway, I wish her a happy birthday.

I must start today with the shocking failure of the Government to inform this House first about the proposal to give away the strategically vital Chagos islands.



[Chris Philp]

The Government should have waited a few days until Parliament was sitting, or waited a few weeks until the Mauritius election was over, and told this House first. They showed total contempt for Parliament. Will the Leader of the House take this opportunity to apologise to the House now and explicitly commit that this will never happen again?

The Chagos proposal is shocking: paying—yes, paying—to give away sovereign territory to a country allied with China, which might be allowed to place military or intelligence assets near the Diego Garcia base; downgrading a sovereign base to merely a leased base, when leases can of course be terminated; and ignoring the Chagos islanders themselves. The Opposition will oppose the plans every step of the way. Will the Leader of the House now expressly confirm to the House that there will be a Bill on these proposals and a CRAg—Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010—vote on the treaty itself? Can she tell the House when that will happen?

Members across the House are horrified by the Government's callous plan to strip winter fuel payments from most pensioners, including 84% of those in poverty. The Government refused to provide the equalities impact assessment in response to a written parliamentary question from one of my colleagues, but just a few days after the vote they slipped out that assessment via a freedom of information request. That denied Members of Parliament the chance to see the impact assessment before voting, presumably because the Government wanted to disguise from their own Back Benchers the fact that over 70% of disabled pensioners will lose their winter fuel payment. The failure to disclose key information to this House appears to me to be a breach of section 1.3(d) of the "Ministerial Code". First, will the Leader of the House apologise to the House for hiding that information before the critical vote, and will she ask the independent adviser on Ministers' interests to investigate that as a potential breach of the ministerial code? If she will not, then I will.

The public up and down the country are horrified at the Prime Minister's insatiable and venal appetite for freebies. He has had more than any other MP in the last five years, totalling over £100,000: designer suits, £1,000 spectacles, pop concerts and stays in an £18 million penthouse, all paid for by Lord Waheed Alli, who was rewarded with a Downing Street pass and influence over appointments. Not a Government of service, but a Government of self-service, feathering its nest courtesy of Lord Alli's extremely capacious credit card. Is the Leader of the House ashamed that the Prime Minister has been doing that at the same time as stripping pensioners of their winter fuel allowance? He has paid back £6,000 of the £100,000. Can she explain why it is £6,000? Will he be paying back any more?

Finally, this weekend marks 100 days since the formation of the Labour Government. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] I wouldn't get too excited. It is fair to say that they have been busy: a chief of staff fired; millions of pensioners on low incomes stripped of their winter fuel allowance; inflation-busting pay rises for train drivers and the unions, without any performance improvements in return; and schools in chaos as a result of botched VAT plans that even the trade unions—even the trade unions—say should not be implemented in January.

Many successful people, it turns out, are now leaving or planning to leave the country. In the Budget in a few weeks' time, it appears that tax rises and ballooning borrowing are coming as the debt rules are rewritten, all breaking election promises. Perhaps it is no surprise that the Prime Minister's personal poll ratings have gone down faster than Lord Alli's bank balance after a shopping trip with the Cabinet. A recent poll showed that the public actually now prefer the last Government to this one. If they carry on like this, it will not just be Sue Gray who is in need of a new job.

**Lucy Powell:** I, too, welcome the new Chaplain, Mark Birch. I also pay tribute to Lily Ebert, who dedicated her life to ensuring that the horror of the Holocaust can never happen again. I am sure that all Members will want to send their best wishes to the residents of Florida as the damage of Hurricane Milton unfolds.

I thank you, Mr Speaker, and the rest of the House for the birthday wishes. It is a significant birthday for me. Fifty years ago today was also a general election day, and my mum was in labour and voting Labour. I knew even then that I should not come out before the polling station opened. If the House will indulge me slightly, I will take this opportunity to thank my mum and dad, because I would not be here without their lifelong support.

Not only was that a big day in the history of my family; it was a rare day in that Labour won a general election. Talking of historic victories, this week marks the first 100 days of our new Labour Government. The work of change has begun. I remind the House that we have made fiscal responsibility an Act, so that Liz Truss can never happen again. We have set up GB Energy, lifted the moratorium on onshore wind, invested in carbon capture and storage, and set up the national wealth fund. We have set ambitious new house building targets, and are ending no-fault of evictions and giving new rights to renters. We are bringing our railways back into public ownership, and providing new powers to stop river pollution. We have ended the doctors' strike so we can get the waiting lists down, kept our promise to Figen Murray on Martyn's law, ended one-word Ofsted judgments, set up the border security command, and taken swift action on riots. We are fixing the prisons crisis that the last Government left behind. We are paving the way for better buses across the country. We have tightened the rules on MPs' second jobs, and we are modernising Parliament and reforming the House of Lords.

And today, 97 days after the election, we are introducing the biggest boost to workers' rights in a generation, giving people dignity and security at work, not as a nice extra but as an integral part of a strategy for a high-wage, high-skill, growing economy. We have worked apace to deliver a new deal for workers, tackling exploitative zero-hours contracts, ending fire and rehire, and providing day one rights for bereavement, parental leave and statutory sick pay. We are providing flexible working for those who want it, boosting productivity and living standards. This is what Labour Governments deliver. We have produced twice as many Bills in our first 100 days as the Tories did during the same period after the 2010 election. That is our record, and we are proud of it.

The right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) asked me about the Chagos islands. We are committed to making statements to the House first



when the House is sitting, as is laid down in our “Ministerial Code”. As the Foreign Secretary made clear in his statement to the House on Monday, the requirement for proper parliamentary process and scrutiny will of course be followed. That will include a Bill and the full CRaG process, so I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will have ample opportunity to debate the matter further at that time.

I am aware that the right hon. Gentleman wrote to me about winter fuel payments, because a *Sunday Telegraph* journalist told me that he had written to me before I had actually received his letter. I know that he likes to come to Parliament to raise these matters first, but he is reaching desperately for a conspiracy when there is none. We granted a vote on the winter fuel payment because we respect Parliament; his party did not. We published the equality analysis, although there was no requirement for us to do so; his party would not have done the same. We have had to make a very difficult decision that we did not want to make in order to fill the £22 billion black hole that his party left behind. *[Interruption.]* He does not want to hear it, but it is the truth.

The right hon. Gentleman had some brass neck to raise the issue of standards in Parliament. He and his colleagues voted to change the rules of this House when another of his colleagues was found to be in breach of the rules against taking cash for lobbying. His Prime Minister was found to be in serious breach of the rules when he failed to declare a loan he had received for doing up his flat—a loan brokered by someone to whom he then gave the job of chairman of the BBC. And let us not get into the fast-lane, mates—rates covid contracts that cost taxpayers millions of pounds, or, indeed, the fact that his Government changed the rules on socialising while at the same time partying in Downing Street and lying to the House about it for months on end. We will take no lectures from the party opposite.

While we are getting on with changing the country, the Conservatives are soaking themselves in the comfort of the warm bath of opposition. On the day that we are boosting workers’ rights, they are in a race to the bottom on maternity pay. I gently say to the right hon. Gentleman that it is time the Conservatives took a cold shower. Yesterday showed that they cannot even count—perhaps they should have stuck with the “king of the spreadsheet” after all. In just 26 parliamentary sitting days, we have delivered more Bills and more change in this country than was achieved in 14 sorry years of Conservative rule.

**Catherine Atkinson** (Derby North) (Lab): The east midlands has the lowest level of transport spend per person, at just 56% of the national average. The state of the transport network we have inherited comes nowhere near the level of ambition that I know my colleagues in the east midlands and our new mayor have for economic growth. If the region received the average level of funding across the UK, we would have an extra £1.29 billion every year. May we have a debate about inequalities in regional transport spending?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend raises a very important issue, and we welcome the level of ambition from the mayor and the local authorities in the east midlands to improve transport in the region. As was outlined in Transport questions earlier, the Department for Transport

is undertaking a thorough review of these issues, and I am sure it will soon come back to the House with further information.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Marie Goldman** (Chelmsford) (LD): I echo the words of the Leader of the House about the issues affecting Florida at the moment; we wish everyone safety. I also echo the congratulations of the shadow Leader of the House to the Leader of the House on her very special birthday. I welcome the statement from the Leader of the House, and we on the Liberal Democrat Benches look forward to scrutinising parliamentary business and working constructively for the good of the country.

The new Government have mentioned many times their commitment to building 1.5 million new homes in this Parliament. We Lib Dems recognise that our country is in a housing crisis, and we welcome the target. Although I know that all MPs love donning a hard hat for an all-important photo opportunity, those homes will be delivered not by central Government but by local government, largely through the planning system and partnership work with developers and infrastructure providers. That is the case in my constituency, where the Liberal Democrat-run Chelmsford city council is already delivering, with thousands of new homes being planned. However, these homes are in danger of not being delivered at all if the Government do not urgently act in two extremely important ways. First, they need to speed up their decision making around funding for large infrastructure projects, such as the A12 widening scheme. If this important scheme does not receive the funding promised by the previous Government, more than 10,000 homes may not be delivered.

Secondly, councils that are a long way into developing or reviewing their local plans, such as Chelmsford city council, are extremely concerned that they will miss the arbitrary national planning policy framework transition period deadline by just a matter of weeks. That will render all the expensive work that they have done on their plans null and void, thereby threatening the delivery of thousands of homes and leaving a developer free-for-all in the absence of a valid local plan. Specifically, planning authorities desperately need the Government to extend the transition period in the new NPPF to at least three months. When can we expect to receive assurance about funding for the infrastructure projects that are crucial to supporting the Government’s home building targets, and when can we expect a solution to the cliff edge faced by councils that are currently reviewing their local plans?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the hon. Lady for her birthday wishes and welcome her to her new role. She, too, is a member of the Modernisation Committee, and I very much enjoyed our exchanges at our first meeting in September. I look forward to working with her on the House of Commons Commission, of which I think she will now become a member. Given her background in glazing and construction, I am sure that her insights into the many repairs needed in this place, especially to some of the stained glass windows, will be particularly valuable to the House of Commons Commission. She might not quite realise the heady heights that she has now reached in the House of Commons. Pressing and important matters, such as the cost of a bacon butty in

[Lucy Powell]

the Members' Tea Room and the state of the toilets in Portcullis House, await her valuable contribution and insights in the House of Commons Commission. I pay tribute to her predecessor, whom I have known for many years and who always made thoughtful contributions to this session.

The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) raises some important matters about house building. As she will know, this Government are unashamedly pro house building, but that does not mean that there is a developer free-for-all, as she rightly says. That is why it is important that we boost planning capacity in local authorities, and we are bringing forward the infrastructure Bill to make sure that big infrastructure decisions are taken much more quickly and robustly. I hear what she says about the national planning policy deadlines, and I will make sure that she gets a good reply to that point as soon as possible.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** I do not want to embarrass Members, but I will just say that if you were late in, please do not stand. Let us take somebody who was in very early: Ian Lavery.

**Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): Responsibility for Woodhorn Museum on the former Woodhorn colliery site in my constituency—the home of the fantastic world-renowned pitmen painters—has this week been transferred to Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums by the Tory-led Northumberland county council, which has sold off the family silverware. There has been no consultation whatsoever with residents. Can the Leader of the House please make time in the parliamentary schedule for us to discuss how local people and communities can have a say on how to protect cultural assets in their region?

**Lucy Powell:** As ever, my hon. Friend makes a very important point. These important cultural, industrial and historical assets are for the community to enjoy into the future. I am sure that the topic he raises would make for a very good Adjournment debate, should he wish to apply for one.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): On 9 July 1944, Lily Ebert arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau with her mother, brother and younger sister, who were all murdered in the gas chambers. Somehow Lily escaped. She dedicated her life to spreading awareness of the horrors of the Holocaust and recounting her story, and hundreds of millions of people around the world have seen videos of her reciting her story. She died earlier this week. Despite the efforts of the Nazis, she leaves behind 10 grandchildren, 38 great-grandchildren and one great-great-grandchild; so the attempts of the Nazis to wipe out her family failed. But we have a problem. Lily dedicated her life to spreading the word about what happened in the Holocaust, and we send condolences to her family. As the Holocaust survivors sadly pass away, it is even more vital that we get the Holocaust memorial and the education centre built alongside this place. The Holocaust Memorial Bill is going through its stages in Parliament. Will the

Leader of the House do everything she can to speed up that process, so that before the last Holocaust survivor sadly leaves us, they can witness the monument to making sure that it never happens again?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the hon. Member for that very important tribute to Lily Ebert. She did indeed dedicate her life to ensuring that the next generations are educated on the true horrors of the Holocaust, so that they never happen again. The hon. Member has spent most of his parliamentary career educating the rest of us on these important matters, and pushing forward the Holocaust memorial centre here in Westminster. He knows that that Bill continues its passage in the Lords. I was very pleased to ensure that it was included in this Government's King's Speech programme and had early passage in the other place. Hopefully, it will receive Royal Assent at the earliest opportunity, should both Houses wish it to.

**Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): In recent weeks, two of my constituents have contacted me about unacceptable delays at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, and particularly about wait times for medical assessments. Most recently, concerns have been raised about the performance of the Driving and Vehicle Standards Agency. People in Carlisle and north Cumbria are experiencing incredibly long wait times for driving tests. In areas like mine, where public transport is virtually non-existent, driving is a precursor to being economically active. Will the Leader of the House arrange for the Secretary of State for Transport to make a statement on the steps that the Department for Transport is taking to improve the performance of both the DVLA and the DVSA?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend makes an important point that has been raised in this House previously. Frankly, the situation is just not good enough, especially for people in rural communities like hers, who rely so heavily on being able to drive. She may be aware that there is a Westminster Hall debate next week on the availability of driving tests; that might be a good opportunity to raise some of these issues. I will, of course, ensure that the Minister has heard her question.

**Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Can we have a debate on the hospital review programme? The Leicestershire and Rutland hospitals are now in its scope. We were due to have two hospitals, a midwifery unit and a car park. The proposals were in phase 3, and work had already begun on the plans. I have set up a petition, which is also being shared by fellow Leicester and Leicestershire MPs, to make sure the issue gets the recognition that it needs. I urge everyone in Leicestershire and Rutland to sign the petition. Can we have a debate in Government time on the review, to make sure that the hospitals serving over 1 million people in Leicestershire get the funding that they need?

**Lucy Powell:** The new hospital building programme is of great interest to many Members on both sides of the House. However, when we came into government, we found that the programme was a complete work of fiction. Money had not been allocated for many of the promises that had been made. We are undertaking a full and comprehensive review of the new hospital programme to make a realistic and costed proposal for all the new hospitals that this country so desperately needs.

**Emily Darlington** (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I wish the Leader of the House a happy birthday, and reassure her that life begins at the age she has turned.

This Government have made a huge effort to combat violence against women and girls, both through policing and the courts, but underlying attitudes are more difficult to tackle. In Milton Keynes, I partnered with White Ribbon to make sure we became the first white ribbon city in the UK, and to tackle attitudes by partnering with the police, the shopping centre, the football team and schools to create an environment in which every woman and girl feels safe. International White Ribbon Day is coming up in November. We have always marked it in this House, but does the Leader of the House agree that it would be even more powerful if we became the world's first White Ribbon-accredited Parliament, so as to make sure that every woman and girl feels safe on our estate?

**Lucy Powell:** Life obviously begins at 30. I thank my hon. Friend for raising the important White Ribbon campaign and accreditation, to which she has long been committed. Tackling violence against women and girls is a priority for this Government, and one of our key missions is to halve violence against women and girls over the coming years. We are determined to meet that very ambitious target. Her idea of Parliament undertaking the journey to become a White Ribbon-accredited organisation is very good, and I will discuss it with her and with members of the House of Commons Commission.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to two fine, distinguished, genial and dedicated parliamentarians, whom we have lost in the past few days: Michael Ancram, Lord Lothian; and Sir Geoffrey Pattie, who passed away most recently? I send my appreciation and condolences to their families, and I would be grateful if the Leader of the House did so on behalf of the House.

As it is the Leader of the House's birthday today, would she consider giving a present to this House? It is absolutely true that successive Governments have announced important matters in the media, when they should have announced them first to this House, and successive Oppositions have criticised them for doing so. Will she do her level best to ensure no unnecessary repetition of what we recently saw happen with the announcement on the Chagos islands, which was made so soon before Parliament was set to resume?

**Lucy Powell:** I join the right hon. Member in paying tribute to the eminent parliamentarians he mentioned, whom we recently lost. It is important that this House comes together to do that.

I try to give many presents to this Chamber, which was why I was keen to announce the long-term recess dates; I am sure we can all agree that was a present. The right hon. Gentleman is right that the Government and I, as Leader of the House, are committed to the principle that statements should be made to Parliament first, and should be made to Parliament as soon as possible, if the House is not sitting. I take the firm view that Secretaries of State should make those statements. I work very hard to uphold those principles. Of course, there are times when announcements need to be made during the

recess for international or national reasons, so it is right that the Foreign Secretary came here at the very first opportunity to make his statement to the House.

**Dawn Butler** (Brent East) (Lab): Warm birthday wishes to the Leader of the House. I welcome the announcement that Black History Month will be debated in Government time. I hope that the decision has been made for perpetuity, so that no matter the colour of the Government, the debate will always happen. This year's theme is "reclaiming the narrative." Last week, I posted a poem, "Of the first ones", on my social media platform. It received a lot of support and some wonderful messages, but also a lot of racist abuse. Researchers at the Natural History Museum have stated that

"scientists are sure that homo sapiens first evolved in Africa",

so "reclaiming the narrative" might also mean resetting the narrative. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important to debate such subjects as Black History Month, so that we have an even greater understanding of history?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank my hon. Friend for using an opportunity at Prime Minister's questions yesterday and on other occasions to ask for a debate about Black History Month. It is thanks to her and colleagues' efforts that we have been able to announce that debate today, so I pay tribute to her. I am sure the issues she raises will be discussed during that debate. It is vital that the narrative is reframed, and that we expose the attitudes she describes on social media and elsewhere, which are fuelled by ignorance and hate, and put an end to them.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): May I suggest that the Leader of the House celebrates her special birthday by granting a debate on the amendments to the international health regulations that were agreed at the World Health Assembly in the summer, and that we give MPs a vote on the issue before we hand over sovereignty over important matters of national public health to the World Health Organisation?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for those birthday wishes. As I have gently said on previous occasions, he slightly misunderstands the situation, but of course we always bring important matters before the House. When those matters require a vote—and, in fact, in some cases when they do not require a vote—we have been, and will continue to be, very forthcoming.

**Adam Jogee** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Birthday greetings to the Leader of the House from me and my constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme. Will she join me in paying tribute to all the volunteers and members of the team at Newcastle-under-Lyme food bank? They do wonderful work supporting some of the most vulnerable people in our communities. With that work in mind, can we have a debate on this Government's plans to tackle food poverty?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is absolutely right: it is shocking that in 2024 this great country of ours still requires such a huge and widespread use of food banks and that we are blighted by food poverty. That is why this Government have set up a cross-cutting taskforce to address child poverty,



[Lucy Powell]

and why we are committed to the roll out of free breakfast clubs and the creation of more nurseries in our schools. It is also partly why we are so delighted to introduce the Employment Rights Bill today, so that people can have dignity and security in work.

**Martin Vickers** (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): In north and north-east Lincolnshire, we have some excellent further and higher education institutions that provide the knowledge and skills that our young people need for the evolving world of work. Yesterday, I met representatives of the Association of Colleges, who outlined the challenges that the sector faces. Can we have a debate in Government time on further and higher education colleges to give Members the opportunity to tease out from Government how they see policies developing in that area?

**Lucy Powell:** I know that is a matter of concern for many people, and the Government have speedily set about having a review of the funding of BTecs. That review will be completed very quickly, as it is of great concern to further education colleges. We have education questions on 4 November and the forthcoming Technical Education Bill will soon be coming from the other House.

**Jo Platt** (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): October is ADHD Awareness Month, yet individuals with ADHD—attention deficit hyperactivity disorder—are still being failed with diagnosis delays, medication shortages and a lack of resources in schools and the workplace. May we have a debate on how Government can best support people with ADHD across their lifetime, from childhood to adulthood, to ensure that we can give everybody the opportunity to thrive?

**Lucy Powell:** May I take this opportunity to welcome my hon. Friend back as the MP for Leigh and Atherton? [Interruption.] It is a short holiday that she should never have had from being the MP for Leigh, as it was then. I also thank her for all the work that she has done as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on ADHD. I am sure that this would be a very good topic for a Westminster Hall debate if she should apply for one.

**Max Wilkinson** (Cheltenham) (LD): On Monday, Gloucestershire's police and crime commissioner suspended the county's chief constable. Yesterday, we learned that the deputy chief constable had been suspended in January and subsequently retired in June. These matters remain under investigation and I do not seek to comment on the specifics of the cases, as that would be unfair to the individuals concerned. Given that this leaves our local police force with its two most senior posts vacant, will the Leader of the House consider making time for a debate, or a ministerial statement, on what happens in these difficult circumstances where a leadership vacuum emerges in police forces?

**Lucy Powell:** The hon. Member would not expect me to comment on the individual cases that he outlines. We do have Home Office questions coming up on 21 October and I am sure that he can raise those matters there. One thing that we have found since the election is that morale and leadership in our police forces are not what they could be, which is why the Home Secretary is

embarking on a recruitment drive and reforms in our police force to ensure that we have all the police that we need.

**Chris Murray** (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): Around half a million people rely on heat networks, which is good in achieving our climate goals, but heat networks are not included in the Ofgem price cap. My constituents in Craigmillar are therefore facing a 400% increase in their energy bills. That is terrifying for them and completely unacceptable. Heat networks should have the same protections as traditional heating systems. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time so that we can address this terrible anomaly?

**Lucy Powell:** That very important matter has been raised with me before and I know that it is of real concern to my hon. Friend and to many other colleagues across this House. Next week's Westminster Hall debate on the community benefits of renewable energy projects may provide him with an opportunity to raise it, but if not I will ensure that he gets a good response from the Minister.

**Ben Obese-Jecty** (Huntingdon) (Con): Many happy returns to the Leader of the House, who shares her birthday with the true legend that is my father. Last week, we saw significant flooding in the east of England, and across Cambridgeshire in particular. In my constituency of Huntingdon, I visited local residents whose houses either flooded or were at risk of flooding on Hansell Road and Centenary Way in Brampton, and on Whitecross in St Ives. In all instances, local residents told me that they were frustrated by the lack of co-ordination in the multi-agency response. Afterwards, I wrote to the chief executive of Cambridgeshire county council to address that. He was very quick to abdicate responsibility, stating that

“being a Lead Flood Authority does not mean we are the lead agency in addressing a response to flooding”.

With the Government implementing a flood resilience taskforce, will the Leader of the House make time in the parliamentary schedule to debate the role and responsibilities of co-ordinating the multi-agency response to flooding?

**Lucy Powell:** First, I wish the hon. Member's father a happy birthday. What a great birthday he has—good judgment there. The hon. Member raises the important issue of flood resilience, which gets raised in business questions and elsewhere frequently. As we move into the winter months, the issue is of particular relevance. Were he to apply for a Westminster Hall debate, I know that his application would get wide support, but I will consider whether time can be made for these issues before we get into the winter months.

**Steve Yemm** (Mansfield) (Lab): I welcome the introduction of the Employment Rights Bill today—a truly momentous piece of legislation that will improve conditions for workers across the whole country. Can the Leader of the House advise me on how the Bill will have a significant impact on the working lives of my constituents in Mansfield?

**Lucy Powell:** We are delighted that that huge Bill will be introduced today. I put on the record my thanks to the Deputy Prime Minister and the Secretary of State



for Business and Trade and all their officials, who have worked at pace to introduce this huge and important Bill within 100 days of the election. As my hon. Friend says, it will do many things. I will not go into them now, but it is an important reminder that in 1997, when the previous Labour Government introduced the Bill that became the National Minimum Wage Act 1998, it was resoundingly opposed by Conservative Members, as they are seemingly opposing today's Employment Rights Bill. I am sure that that will be a matter of much debate in the coming weeks as we discuss the Bill.

**Carla Denyer** (Bristol Central) (Green): Many happy returns to the Leader of the House. This week, questions have been raised about whether Lord Walney is to be sacked as the Government's anti-extremism adviser, amid concerns about his independence. I understand that a formal complaint will be lodged next week about paid roles that he held advising lobbyists for clients including fossil fuel and arms companies at the same time as he advised the Government that some peaceful climate protesters and anti-war protesters should be considered extremists. May we have a debate on whether we need to revisit the rules around when a Government adviser is formally described as independent, especially when the Government have said that they want to raise standards?

**Lucy Powell:** The hon. Member raises an important matter about a public appointment, the specifics of which I will not get into now, as to do so would not be appropriate. Home Office questions will be on 21 October, but I will ensure that she gets a response from a Minister long before then.

**Sally Jameson** (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): Despite warm words and promises from Ministers and indeed Prime Ministers in the last Government, Doncaster royal infirmary, for reasons that to this day are still unclear, was left off the new hospitals programme, which we now know was not even funded. Will the Leader of the House allow time for a debate on Doncaster's need for a new hospital and our extensive repair backlog, as well as the urgent need to transfer all patient records from paper to digital so that people in my constituency can have the healthcare that they deserve?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend describes a familiar story. The woeful state of the infrastructure within our NHS and the capital and digital assets are matters of huge importance and great urgency. As I said in answer to an earlier question, unfortunately the last Government's new hospital building programme was a work of fiction, and we are working at pace to put that right. I understand that Doncaster and Bassetlaw teaching hospitals NHS foundation trust is due to receive its critical infrastructure risk funding soon, but I will ensure that she gets a full response about the future of her hospital.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): May I also wish the Leader of the House a very happy birthday? Fifty is definitely the new 30 in her case. An investigation by researchers at the University of Bath has revealed that schoolchildren in England are unknowingly smoking vapes spiked with the synthetic drug Spice, which is highly addictive. Tests on just under 600 confiscated vapes revealed that one in six contained Spice. That is an alarming figure. The Government must raise awareness

of this issue in schools to educate young people, teachers and parents. Can we have a debate in Government time to raise this serious issue and discuss how we can protect young people from a life of serious addiction?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the hon. Member for the birthday wishes and for all her work over recent months. As ever, she raises another thoughtful and important matter. She will be aware that the Government are committed to imminently bringing forward the tobacco and vapes Bill, which will rightly bring in new restrictions around the sale of vapes to children, and there will be further measures announced in the Bill when it is soon introduced.

**Alice Macdonald** (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): In Norfolk, safety concerns regarding school ceilings have recently been identified. Norfolk county council has inspected 60 schools and at least 15 are in need of urgent repairs; signs of these faults were reportedly missed in previous inspections. Can we have a debate on school safety in Government time to ensure that every child is educated in a decent building?

**Lucy Powell:** The woeful state of our crumbling school buildings is there for all to see, and the reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete scandal a year or so ago was just another symptom of the previous Government's lack of decision making and lack of funding for these things. I am sure that the Education Secretary would be happy to take a question from my hon. Friend in oral questions, which are coming up soon, and I will ensure that the relevant Minister has heard her question.

**Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): Many Members, including reportedly the Health Secretary, have grave concerns about the proposal to legalise euthanasia. Changing the law would change our relationship with the elderly, the infirm and the vulnerable, and risk a broadening scope and abuses of power. On such a serious issue, we need proper consultation and real debate, so instead of rushing this measure through in a private Member's Bill on a Friday, will Ministers commit to a proper, considered consultation, and then make available Government time for us to carefully address this very serious matter?

**Lucy Powell:** The hon. Member will know that assisted dying is a matter of conscience and therefore a matter for Parliament; it is not one on which the Government have a view or will take an active role. We will remain neutral. Should someone wish to bring forward a private Member's Bill, I am sure that it will progress through respectful and lengthy debate in Parliament, as we have had in the past and has taken place in the other House. That is a long-standing convention. The Government have set aside collective responsibility to allow the debate to happen in a thoughtful and thorough way.

**Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): Today is World Mental Health Day, so I pay tribute to staff and volunteers at charities such as Mind BLMK and Samaritans, among many others, who do brilliant work to support people in Luton South and South Bedfordshire. This year's theme is mental health in the workplace, so I was delighted to see Labour's Employment Rights Bill formally laid in Parliament today, and even more pleased to hear the Leader of the

[Rachel Hopkins]

House announce that its Second Reading will be on 21 October, even though that pre-empted my question. I will simply ask: does she agree that Labour's Bill will make a huge difference to people's mental wellbeing in the workplace and that the whole House should support it on that basis alone?

**Lucy Powell:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

**Mr Lee Dillon** (Newbury) (LD): I extend my warm wishes to the Leader of the House on her special birthday.

With one pharmacist per 7,200 residents, West Berkshire has the lowest provision of pharmacists in the country—the national average is one pharmacist per 4,600 residents. Will the Leader of the House allocate Government time to debate how the current NHS pharmacy contract restricts the availability of pharmacists, particularly in west Berkshire?

**Lucy Powell:** The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Rolling out the availability of pharmacy services is vital for the Government's agenda on prevention and on providing services—be they GPs or pharmacies—in every community. Those are important matters. I know that the Health Secretary will continue to update the House. Health questions are next week should the hon. Gentleman wish to raise the matter then.

**Navendu Mishra** (Stockport) (Lab): I congratulate the Leader of the House—my constituency neighbour—on her birthday, and wish her and her family the best.

Mr Speaker has left the Chair, but I know that he is, like me, a long-standing user of Avanti West Coast trains for his constituency travel, so I am sure that he will be familiar with their poor reliability. Last week, I was made aware of a serious crisis at my local station, Stockport. It seems that Avanti is simply not employing enough staff for the station to function when it comes to passenger and worker safety, and passenger experience. The *Financial Times* recently reported that Avanti was the worst-performing train operator in the UK between April and June. Will the Leader of the House allocate Government time for a debate on the impact of Avanti's operational performance not just on the regional economy in the north, but on the national economy and public infrastructure?

**Lucy Powell:** Like my hon. Friend, I am a regular user of Avanti West Coast services and Stockport station. I hope that Avanti's reliability will be spot on this afternoon so that I can get home in time for a birthday meal—please take note! He raises an important issue. The privatisation programme has not worked, and our trains have for too long been unreliable and expensive, serving the country poorly. That is why we very quickly introduced the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Bill, which is now in the other place. We will soon bring forward a further Bill to establish Great British Railways in order to bring our trains back into public ownership once again.

**Sarah Bool** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I wish the Leader of the House many happy returns.

In South Northamptonshire, more than 4,000 people have a diabetes diagnosis, yet only 54% of them have the required treatment to avoid complications. We need to

remove the stigma around diabetes and secure greater access to technology. Will the Leader of the House urge the Government to take action to ensure that we take the treatment of diabetes seriously and give patients the support that they need?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the hon. Lady for that important question. She is absolutely right: diabetes is one of those illnesses alongside which people can live long, healthy and happy lives if they get the right treatment. Technology is moving at a particularly fast pace in that area, and if every patient could get access to it, that would improve their quality of life. Were she to ask for a Westminster Hall or Adjournment debate, I am sure that it would be well received.

Several hon. Members rose—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** More than 20 people are hoping to get in, so let us keep contributions short and snappy.

**David Williams** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I extend my birthday wishes to the Leader of the House.

One of my Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove constituents recently told me about the difficulty they were having in securing a test to qualify as a driving instructor. We have a dire need for more driving instructors to tackle the backlog of those waiting for tests. Will the Leader of the House make time to debate the matter in the House?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend is the second Member to raise that important topic this morning. He may not be aware but there is a Westminster Hall debate on 16 October on the availability of driving tests. Of course, having qualified driving instructors is critical to that endeavour, so he may wish to attend that debate.

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): House buyers in Acland Park in Feniton thought that they were buying homes in which they could raise their families, but their deeds stated that the Acland Park Management Company would apply to get the road adopted by county council highways and the sewers by South West Water. Since then, the management company has become insolvent, the roads and sewers have not been adopted and the residents cannot move or sell their homes. Will the Government grant us a debate on flawed, failed and rip-off property management companies?

**Lucy Powell:** That topic gets raised many times in this House, and we are all well aware of it. It is part of the reason we will be introducing draft legislation on leasehold reform, which is a long-standing issue. I am sure the hon. Gentleman could raise the issue of managing agents in a further debate, either in Westminster Hall or through the Backbench Business Committee once it is established.

**Graeme Downie** (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): With many high street banks announcing local branch closures and pointing people to the post office as a resource for services, the attractiveness of being a sub-postmaster has never been more important. In my constituency, though, our post office in Cairneyhill will be closing, and those considering taking it over are

being put off by the costs and complications involved. Could time be allowed for a discussion of how to support new postmasters to take on those vital community roles?

**Lucy Powell:** Postmasters have had a very difficult time in recent years, and there are still many questions facing the Post Office about the support, recruitment and remuneration of postmasters. I am sure that would make an extremely good topic for a debate in this House.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Happy birthday, Leader of the House! To make quite a simple point, do not count the years—instead, make the years count. That is the important thing to do.

On the minds of Members who care about protecting freedom of religion or belief is a man of great importance, Jimmy Lai. British citizen Jimmy Lai, who will turn 77 at the end of this year, has been detained in solitary confinement in a maximum security prison in Hong Kong for nearly four years since December 2020. Confined to a cell for 23 hours of the day, his Catholic faith is a source of strength. What steps can the Government take to raise the case of Mr Lai with the Hong Kong authorities, and will representations be made concerning reports that Mr Lai—a practising Roman Catholic—has been denied access to the Eucharist, aggravating that inhumane treatment even more and impinging on his freedom of religion?

**Lucy Powell:** What better birthday present than a question from the hon. Gentleman, and some pearls of wisdom to go with it! I will take his words on board.

As ever, the hon. Gentleman raises a very important case. Mr Lai's case is a priority for this Government; the Foreign Secretary has already raised it with China's Foreign Minister, and we continue to call on the Hong Kong authorities to end their politically motivated prosecution and to release him immediately.

**Mark Ferguson** (Gateshead Central and Wickham) (Lab): I must declare an interest before asking my question: before serving in this place, I am proud to have served as a national officer for Unison, the biggest trade union and, by membership, the biggest organisation for women in the country. As such, I am particularly pleased to see the measures dealing with maternity rights in the Employment Rights Bill presented today. It is estimated that more than 4,000 women who were dismissed last year will benefit from the provisions in the Bill. The Conservative party has pushed through to the final two of its leadership contest—whether or not it intended to do so—a candidate who believes that maternity pay has gone too far.

**Chris Philp:** Not true.

**Mark Ferguson:** Conservative Members may not want to hear it, but it is true. On that point, will we have plenty of time to discuss the important issue of maternity rights as the Bill progresses?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend can take a great deal of personal satisfaction and thanks for the Bill getting to this place, along with his union Unison, which we are proud to have worked with on that Bill and on the Make Work Pay policy document that supports it. He is

absolutely right: the issues of maternity pay, parental leave, bereavement leave and zero-hours contracts, as well as all the other benefits in the Bill, will be widely debated as it progresses through the House of Commons.

**Danny Beales** (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): There is an even better birthday present than a question from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon): theatre tickets to the Beck theatre in Hillingdon. That theatre is much loved by my residents and constituents, but unfortunately we face the real prospect of its closing in the coming weeks due to the inaction of the local Conservative council in Hillingdon. Would the Leader of the House make time in this place to discuss the real value created by arts, culture, and community theatres such as the Beck?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend raises the very important matter of community theatres, and the one in his constituency sounds really important. It is a matter of national shame that so many theatres are struggling to find funding, and I hope that his local authority will reconsider its decision. He may wish to raise this issue next week at Culture, Media and Sport questions.

**Claire Hughes** (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): May I say penblwydd hapus iawn to the Leader of the House?

Last week, I was absolutely delighted to attend the launch of Bangor University's new medical school, a really exciting development that will not only train the next generation of doctors in north Wales, but be a real catalyst for regional investment. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating all those involved in delivering the medical school, and make time for a debate in this House on the important role that universities can play in stimulating regional growth?

**Lucy Powell:** To see the new medical school opening is a brilliant thing to happen so early in my hon. Friend's time as the MP representing Bangor. It will be a vital facility in helping this Government to deliver our ambitions for an extra 40,000 appointments a week and all the additional doctors that our NHS so desperately needs, so I am delighted to thank all of those involved, and I thank her for supporting it.

**Patricia Ferguson** (Glasgow West) (Lab): May I wish my right hon. Friend an excellent time on her very special day?

Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Drumchapel citizens advice bureau and thank it for dealing with 7,448 clients, clocking up 12,442 volunteer-hours and securing some £2,810,039 for clients in the course of the last year? Drumchapel citizens advice bureau, although excellent, faces a situation that is of course typical across communities up and down this country. Would the Government be able to provide time for a debate so that we can recognise the work of CABs and discuss what further support they might be given?

**Lucy Powell:** I am sure every Member of Parliament in this House will want to thank the citizens advice bureaux for the work they do across the country in providing our constituents with so much support and advice. I am sure that would be a very welcome topic for a Backbench Business or Adjournment debate if she wanted to apply for one.



**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. I am going to try to get everybody in, so let us keep questions really short.

**Ben Goldsborough** (South Norfolk) (Lab): I recently met campaigners in the beautiful village of Toft Monks in my constituency to talk about road safety in the area. There is a campaign running, which I am supporting, to lower the speed limit to 30 mph to make sure that children can walk to school safely on the village roads. Can we have a debate in Government time on highway safety in rural areas?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank my hon. Friend for that question. That is a great topic for a debate. We had Transport questions this morning, but if he wants to put in for an Adjournment debate on that, I am sure it would be looked on kindly.

**Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): I would like to pay tribute to my fellow Libran, and say that 50 is indeed the new 21. As a woman of a certain age, I know that it is really important for us in this House and for everybody to celebrate and raise awareness of World Menopause Day, which is on 18 October, as well as the work of Maggie's, the cancer charity, which wants to highlight the issue of early treatment-induced menopause for women receiving cancer treatment. Can we have a debate on the Floor of this House about the crash menopause and raising awareness for women undergoing cancer treatment?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend highlights the important work that Maggie's and others do and those affected by cancer that brings on the necessary early onset of menopause and other issues. I am sure she will continue to raise these matters in the House.

**Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I wish my parliamentary namesake a happy birthday.

Dockless e-bikes are an increasingly popular transport mode in Kensington and Chelsea and in Westminster, yet local authorities do not have the powers to regulate inappropriate parking and antisocial behaviour. Would the Leader of the House consider granting time to debate whether local authorities should have more power to regulate the dockless e-bike rental market?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend does indeed have a great surname! He is absolutely right that e-bikes can be a blight and a challenge, and there are safety issues. The Government are currently considering these issues, and we have introduced the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill that will consider some of these matters further, so I am sure there will be plenty of debate.

**Mr Mark Sowards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): During the recess, I had the privilege of visiting Elliott Hudson college, an outstanding institution delivering excellent post-16 education in my constituency. The students had some fairly tough questions for me—the future is very bright in Leeds South West and Morley—but my question today is about the decision to pause and review the cancellation of the applied general qualifications, and specifically the impact of that on the ability of colleges such as Elliott Hudson to plan for the future.

The review is absolutely the right course of action for the Government to take, but will the Leader of the House provide time for this House to be updated on its progress, so that post-16 education institutions such as of Elliott Hudson can have some clarity on what qualifications they can offer next year?

**Lucy Powell:** As I know from my own constituency, this matter is raised with Members regularly by further education colleges. The Government have paused the planned defunding of those qualifications, which means that 95 qualifications are again available to learners. The review is taking place as quickly as possible. I hope we will publish it before Christmas, and I can guarantee that there will be a statement to this House at that time.

**David Baines** (St Helens North) (Lab): I am sad to inform the House that my colleague and friend Councillor Linda Maloney MBE passed away recently. She served the local community in St Helens for 30 years as a councillor, and she was a trailblazer on the Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority. She was a formidable woman, a strong Labour woman and an inspiration to many people, including me. Will the Leader of the House join me in sending condolences to her husband, Mike, and family? Could she find time for a debate on the importance and value of community campaigners and councillors such as Linda, to recognise the difference they make to communities up and down the country?

**Lucy Powell:** Linda Maloney sounds like a wonderful woman who served her community in St Helens brilliantly over a long period. It is a very welcome reminder of the important role that our councillors, volunteers and community activists play in making sure that our communities are the best places in which to live and work.

**Darren Paffey** (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): The murder of Mark Noke in my constituency last year, in a terrible case of mistaken identity when a drug gang went to the wrong address, was a heartbreaking and senseless tragedy, especially for his family, whom I met recently. Although justice was served with seven convictions, I believe that the experience of the family throughout the trial could have been improved. Will the Leader of the House set out how this House can monitor the new Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 to ensure that its provisions are implemented, and will she advise how the voices of bereaved families such as my constituents can be heard in that process?

**Lucy Powell:** I am sorry to hear of the tragic case that my hon. Friend has outlined, and my condolences go to the loved ones of Mark Noke. We are going to implement the reforms in the Victims and Prisoners Act, but we will also go further. We are going to introduce the victims, courts and public protection Bill later in this Session, and I am sure he will want to follow that with a close eye.

**Mr Alex Barros-Curtis** (Cardiff West) (Lab): An elderly constituent of mine in Cardiff West has been involved in months of protracted correspondence with His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, which has suddenly demanded that my constituent hand over payslips dating back 50 years to satisfy itself about my constituent's employment half a century ago. The House will know that the number 50 holds a particular resonance for my right



hon. Friend today, so may I take the liberty of asking that she looks kindly at a request for a debate on how HMRC approaches such cases with our elderly constituents?

**Lucy Powell:** I think my hon. Friend misheard—it is 30! [*Laughter.*] He raises what sounds like the really ludicrous situation of expecting somebody to find so many payslips over a whole lifetime as evidence, and I will definitely raise the matter with Treasury Ministers.

**Lee Pitcher** (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): This is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and over the last few months I have seen how Bawtry has turned the town pink, with 70 organisations coming together to raise awareness of this really important topic. In fact, I think the last time I saw as many bras on display was when I was a young kid of about seven years old and shopping with my mum and sister, and took the wrong turn in Marks and Spencer. Would the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Bawtry and those 70 organisations on raising awareness of this massively important issue, and of the importance of noting and identifying the symptoms of breast cancer early?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend might attract some other attention to Bawtry, now that he has said how many bras are on display. He raises an important issue about Breast Cancer Awareness Month and the importance of the screening programme in preventing many deaths—it prevents 1,300 deaths a year. He is right that the programme has been declining, so the efforts of his constituents and others to raise breast cancer awareness and highlight the importance of screening are absolutely to be applauded.

**Andrew Cooper** (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): The Cheshire county netball under-17 squad, which includes girls from my constituency, will travel to America next month to compete in the netball open championships—the first British team to be invited to do so, I believe. I know that the team will have an unforgettable experience and will showcase their talent, and I wish them all the best. Will the Minister arrange a debate on the benefits of supporting grassroots teams and facilitating their participation in such events, which offer youngsters unique opportunities and help develop cultural relationships between countries and friendships between competitors?

**Lucy Powell:** I am delighted to congratulate the Cheshire county under-17 squad on successfully reaching the 2024 USA netball open championships—what an achievement.

Netball is a fantastic sport; I really enjoyed it as a youngster, as my daughter does now. My hon. Friend might want to raise these issues in the next debate on the importance of sport in our society.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Having saved the best till last, I call Jim Dickson.

**Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): You are too kind, Madam Deputy Speaker. Residents in the town of Swanscombe in my constituency are having their lives blighted and made a misery by the diversion of large vehicles through their narrow streets due to the collapse of the A226 Galley Hill Road 17 months ago. A combination of Kent county council, Thames Water and the Department for Transport is needed to fix this. Might a debate be scheduled to debate this important issue?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend raises a really important matter for his constituency, and it is exactly the sort of subject that would benefit from an application for an Adjournment debate in the House.

## BILL PRESENTED

### EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS BILL

#### *Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Secretary Jonathan Reynolds, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Angela Rayner, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Pat McFadden, Secretary Bridget Phillipson, Secretary Liz Kendall, Secretary Louise Haigh, Anneliese Dodds, and Justin Madders, presented a Bill to make provision to amend the law relating to employment rights; to make provision about procedure for handling redundancies; to make provision about the treatment of workers involved in the supply of services under certain public contracts; to provide for duties to be imposed on employers in relation to equality; to provide for the establishment of the School Support Staff Negotiating Body and the Adult Social Care Negotiating Body; to make provision about trade unions, industrial action, employers' associations and the functions of the Certification Officer; to make provision about the enforcement of legislation relating to the labour market; and for connected purposes.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 14 October, and to be printed (Bill 11) with explanatory notes (Bill 11-EN).*

## Sport: Team GB and ParalympicsGB

12.23 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered sport and the performance of Team GB and ParalympicsGB in 2024.

This Government could not be prouder of the performance of our Olympians and Paralympians at the Paris 2024 games. All our British athletes who participated this summer have done something quite amazing on a global stage. While many won medals, they have all inspired the nation. Team GB brought home 65 medals—the third highest haul of all time, one more than the number won in Tokyo, and equal to the number won at London 2012. ParalympicsGB finished second in the medal table, winning medals across 18 of the 19 sports that the team competed in, still the highest of any nation ever.

The breadth and depth of Team GB's success was amazing. There were so many incredible moments: Tom Pidcock's recovery from a puncture to take gold in the mountain biking, Alex Yee's sprint finish to snatch gold in the men's triathlon, and Keely Hodgkinson storming to gold on the track in the 800 metres, to name but a few. Barnsley's own Becky Moody also brought home a bronze as part of the Team GB dressage team.

As Sports Minister, I had the privilege of visiting Paris for the Olympics and Paralympics. It was great to cheer on Team GB road cyclists and swimmers at the Olympics as well as to visit the Olympic village and see exactly how our athletes are supported throughout their Olympic experience. At the Paralympics, it was brilliant to see Maisie Summers-Newton bring home a gold in the 200 metre medley, and I was absolutely gripped by the wheelchair tennis, where I was lucky to see both Andy Lapthorne and Greg Slade win their singles matches. I thank those at Team GB and ParalympicsGB who hosted me, Nick Webborn, Dave Clarke, Andy Anson and a former Member of this House, Sir Hugh Robertson, and of course Sally Munday and Dame Katherine Grainger and everyone at UK Sport.

I cannot begin to imagine the thousands of hours of training, recovery, competition and qualifying that preceded Paris. I do, however, understand the importance of this Government continuing to support our elite athletes. Indeed, I know how important funding directed through UK Sport is to their success and preparation, and how the British Olympic Association and ParalympicsGB ensure that in the final stretch our athletes continue to be some of the best supported to do their best when the medal moment comes.

In terms of Team GB's success, since 1896, when the modern Olympic games first took place in Athens, British and Northern Irish athletes have competed at every Olympic games.

**Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab):** I absolutely support the work that this Government and previous Governments have done to support elite athletes in the Olympics and in other ways; it is incredibly important. Does my hon. Friend agree that the inspirational work done by our Olympians motivates a whole generation of new people to get into sport, and supporting elite sport is a tremendously important way of driving up participation?

**Stephanie Peacock:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right and I will address that point shortly.

Team GB has been in the top seven in the Olympics since 2008, and ParalympicsGB has also achieved top three finishes in every Paralympic games since 2000. It is a remarkable record of achievement, and one that truly cements success into our sporting culture. We have not always had the same success in the medal table, and Team GB has come a long way since Atlanta 1996, when they left with a single gold medal. But thanks to National Lottery and UK Sport funding, we have transformed our fortunes. Indeed, UK Sport has invested £385 million of Exchequer and Lottery funds into success at the Paris Olympics and Paralympics. The Government recognise the vital importance of this funding continuing to support the opportunity for all our talented athletes to succeed, which is why we are fully committed to multi-year funding for our elite sport system to enable our athletes to excel on the world stage. This means supporting them financially to match and build on their success in Paris as we look forward to LA 2028.

We have also seen the great development of the ChangeMakers initiative, which aims to help athletes maximise their impact on their return from Paris 2024 and give back to the local communities that have supported them. Athletes can choose the social impact projects they wish to support, which could be anything from grassroots sports projects to mental health initiatives—whatever causes they are passionate about—demonstrating how major events transform the lives not only of athletes, but of everyday people across our nation.

That is because, at a basic level, this Government want people to get more active, and we want to ensure that sport is open to everyone. Major sporting events present an opportunity to inspire the nation to get active. Indeed, nearly two thirds of British people say they are inspired by the success of our Olympic and Paralympic teams.

**Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab):** I could not associate myself more closely with my hon. Friend's comments. I declare an interest: I had the privilege of working at Channel 4 before joining Parliament. With 7.3 billion minutes viewed, Channel 4's coverage of the Paralympics was its biggest ever. The growth of para sport is not just an exciting opportunity for British sport, but a great opportunity to make sport more accessible to everyone. Does the Minister agree that this commitment to the Paralympics should leave a lasting legacy that ensures disabled people across the country have access to physical activity?

**Stephanie Peacock:** My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point, which I support. When the Secretary of State was at the Paralympics, shortly after I had attended, she attended an event where she spoke about getting disabled young people more active in sport.

The benefits to public health from everyone being active are well known, whether that is supporting mental health or managing long-term conditions. For example, physical activity directly prevents 900,000 cases of diabetes and 93,000 cases of dementia each year. That is why it is important to have high-quality, inclusive grassroots facilities to help ensure that everyone has access to sport. The Government have committed to continue the multi-sport grassroots facilities programme, which will invest £123 million across the UK this year. I saw at first hand

the impact of that funding in my first visit as Sports Minister to Derby racecourse's new state-of-the-art hub. I have also seen it my own area of Barnsley, whether it is the Houghton Main miners welfare ground, the Wombwell recreation ground playing fields or the new Parkside facility in Hoyland, which will see spades in the ground this weekend. I am looking forward to visiting. I know the difference that programme has made and will make to local communities.

As a former teacher, I understand the importance of sport and physical activity for children. A recent Youth Sport Trust survey found that 87% of schools considered sport to make a positive contribution to achievement. We are committed to protecting time for physical education, and the Department for Education's upcoming review of the curriculum will ensure that no child misses out on a broad range of subjects, including PE and sport. The advantages of sport and physical activity are clear for all to see.

**Jonathan Davies** (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that some 20% of children in Derbyshire are deemed to be overweight? We must make sure that the benefits of elite sport filter down to schools across the country.

**Stephanie Peacock:** I share that concern. In my constituency in the borough of Barnsley, 34% of children are inactive. Obesity and inactivity are an important challenge that we need to tackle, and sport is central to that. We know that sport improves our health and life chances. It protects us against many chronic conditions, such as coronary heart disease, obesity and type 2 diabetes. Some 65% of schools consider sport to make a positive contribution to attainment. It is also a fantastic enabler of growth, contributing 1.25 million jobs and £53.6 billion of direct gross value added to the economy. We also know that it benefits society and communities. For example, sports-based early intervention initiatives consistently report that more than 70% of participants have reduced offending and antisocial behaviour. Grassroots sport directly contributes to preventing 10,000 incidents of crime.

It is therefore a pleasure to be debating sport today in this Chamber following our brilliant Olympic success. We all remember the success of London 2012, and I know that many of today's Olympians spoke of that summer as being formative to their aspirations. One of the greatest political champions of the London 2012 games was the late, great Dame Tessa Jowell, alongside one of my predecessors as Sports Minister and former fellow Yorkshire MP, Richard Caborn. As he highlights in his book, some people say that politics should stay out of sport, but major sporting events are inseparably grounded in politics, and I am proud that it was a Labour Government who secured London 2012. This Labour Government will take forward that the legacy, supporting the next generation of athletes as we look to LA 2028 and building on our successful record of hosting major sporting events as we host the women's rugby world cup in 2025 and the Euros in 2028. We will support grassroots sport so that everyone, whatever their background or postcode, can take part in the sports they love.

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

12.34 pm

**Mr Louie French** (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): It is my pleasure to open today's debate on behalf of the official Opposition. I start by welcoming the new Secretary of State and Ministers to their place on the Front Bench. I look forward to what I am sure will be plenty of robust but fair debate in the weeks and months ahead. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) on her unopposed return as the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. I agree with the Secretary of State's remarks a few weeks ago that the mark of any good Government is the ability to welcome challenge. I am sure that as the official Opposition, we will provide just that, alongside the Select Committee, in the spirit of healthy competition and in the national interest.

Own goals, knock-ons and false starts are sporting phrases that could easily describe the shambolic first 100 days of this Labour Government. Thankfully those words not do reflect the performances of our Olympic and Paralympic athletes in Paris, who did their country proud again this summer. While there was a reduction in the overall amount of British gold—not for the first time under a new Labour Government—the 327 athletes who made up Team GB at the Paris Olympics delivered a respectable seventh-place finish in the medal table, winning a total of 65 medals across 18 different sports.

We saw Ellie Aldridge become the first Olympic gold medallist in kite surfing. Kate Shortman and Izzy Thorpe won Team GB's first ever Olympic medal in artistic swimming—not something I know too much about—while Toby Roberts became the first medallist for Team GB in sport climbing, winning gold in the boulder and lead combined. Who can forget the emotional scenes of watching Andy Murray's last appearance on court after a fantastic career, the breathtaking drama of the athletics relays, GB rowers surging to victory near the finish line or, my personal favourite, which the Minister has already referenced, the sprint finish of Alex Yee, who reminded the world not to write off us south-east Londoners?

The same spirit was clearly demonstrated by our fantastic Paralympic athletes over the summer, with Great Britain finishing second in the medal table on 49 gold medals, making it the third consecutive second-place finish for Great Britain at the Paralympic games. That is an achievement I know the whole House and country will celebrate. With eight more gold medals won than in Tokyo three years ago, the ParalympicsGB team also equalled another record set then, winning medals across 18 of the 19 sports in which the team competed. That is still the highest number of any nation ever, and more than half of the 215 athletes in the team reached the podium.

While Labour MPs were busy shaking it off to Taylor Swift, Dame Sarah Storey was on her bike adding to her personal medal haul with a level of consistency and performance similar to that of England's now all-time leading run scorer, Joe Root. Who can forget the incredible personal achievements of Paris swimmers Poppy Maskill and Alice Tai or wheelchair racer Sammi Kinghorn, who all left Paris with five medals each?

As any athlete or sport enthusiast knows, sport is nothing without the fans, coaches and thousands of volunteers across our great nation who help to support our grassroots clubs and top-class athletes to achieve their dreams and inspire the next generation. This summer



[Mr Louie French]

was no different, with excellent coverage from the likes of the BBC and Channel 4 allowing an estimated 56 million viewers to witness another triumph of British sport and our athletes once again showcasing the best of British endeavour, character and competitive spirit. Britain

“invented the majority of the world’s great sports....19th century Britain was the cradle of a leisure revolution every bit as significant as the agricultural and industrial revolutions we launched in the century before.”

Those are the words of the former Prime Minister, Sir John Major, and they still ring true today. The Conservative party has maintained his commitment to our athletes, from the grassroots all the way to the elite athletes competing at the international level.

Before I move on to talk about the Conservatives’ proud record of supporting UK sport, I must highlight the crucial role of national lottery funding. The national lottery, established by a Conservative Government, has funded elite-level sport for more than three decades. In fact, from 2013 to 2017, the national lottery donated £337 million to the funding of UK Sport. According to that fantastic organisation, since national lottery funding began for the Olympics and Paralympics, British athletes have won a total of 863 medals. That funding has transformed British fortunes from finishing 36th in the Olympic medal table at Atlanta in 1996 with just one gold medal, to today, when we are undoubtedly an Olympic and Paralympic powerhouse.

More broadly, since its creation the national lottery has invested more than £49 billion into good causes across the country, with more than £14 million of that going into my constituency of Old Bexley and Sidcup. I am pleased that so many right hon. and hon. Members were able to meet some of those excellent organisations in Parliament just yesterday.

Over the last 14 years, the Conservative party, working alongside many fantastic sporting bodies, has backed our elite athletes. We have seen the Lionesses win a European championship and our men’s team reach a major final for the first time since 1966—we will not talk too much about the result. We also brought football home with the Euro 2020 final played at Wembley stadium. We have secured the competition’s return in 2028, when the UK and Ireland will host the European championships.

At the London Olympics, we all watched as our British athletes led the pack in swimming, cycling and so many other sports, alongside the fantastic Commonwealth Games in both 2014 and 2022, which have combined to inspire a new generation of athletes to greatness on our watch. Whereas Labour delivered the so-called austerity Olympics in 1948, we delivered the best Olympic games for a generation—I personally believe they were the best that the world has ever seen. Who can forget the incredible opening ceremony and the role played by Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II?

The Conservatives committed more than £9 billion so that, as a nation, we could ensure that the games were the most inspiring for our constituents that they could be, despite the financial challenges inherited from the Labour Government in 2010. The then Prime Minister Lord Cameron correctly believed that hosting the Olympics would secure a range of benefits over and above the intrinsic impact on sport, embracing trade, regeneration and national wellbeing. He was undoubtedly correct.

After we delivered the London 2012 Olympic Games for the nation and the world, we promised not to stop there. We committed to delivering an Olympics legacy that the country could be proud of for the decade following the games in five key areas.

**Mr Perkins:** The hon. Member is talking about the post-London Olympics legacy. One legacy is that the amount of physical education taught in schools went down by 45,000 hours under his Government, and the gap between the number of state schools and independent schools doing team sports rocketed. Is the real legacy of his Government not that school sport was massively diminished, and should he not actually be apologising for their record in that regard?

**Mr French:** It was only a matter of time before those on the Labour Benches came out swinging. What I would say is that we could look at the record of the previous Labour Government, who sold off sports pitches, and have a much longer debate about whose legacy is worse.

The previous Conservative Government began to deliver on the Olympics promise right away. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport’s 2015 report, “A Living Legacy: 2010-15 Sport Policy and Investment”, confirmed that 1.6 million more people were playing sport once a week than when London won the Olympic bid under Labour in 2005. To build out that significant improvement, we backed our up-and-coming athletes with more than £1.35 billion for grassroots sport facilities across the country to ensure that they had the best facilities possible to achieve their potential. Funding from Conservative Governments has also seen over £320 million invested in grassroots sports across the country between 2021 to 2025 to build, renovate and maintain grass pitches and multi-sport facilities. That included up to 8,000 new and improved multi-sport grassroots facilities and pitches across the whole of the UK, helping the next generation to avoid the waterlogged and muddy pitches that I remember not so fondly from my experiences growing up playing football and rugby.

Between 2022 and 2024, £21.9 million was provided to renovate more than 3,000 tennis courts across Scotland, England and Wales. More than £60 million was provided by the last Government through the swimming pool support fund in 2023 and 2024 to support public swimming pool providers in England with immediate cost pressures and to provide investment to make facilities sustainable in the longer term. As most people will appreciate, swimming is not just a fantastic sport but a key life skill. Communities across the country have also benefited from the last Government’s community ownership fund, which helped save more than 330 pubs, sports clubs, arts venues and other precious community spaces. Also, we must not forget the £30 million Lionesses futures fund, which is helping to provide opportunities for the next generation of Lionesses. That £30 million is being used to build approximately 30 new state-of-the-art pitches and accompanying facilities. The sites will be designed to prioritise women and girls’ teams across England.

Importantly, the prominence of female athletes such as the Lionesses, Dame Kelly Holmes and Dame Jessica Ennis-Hill has helped to increase the number of women in England who participate in sport and physical activity. That legacy continues, with 550,000 more women



participating than did eight years ago. Of course, there is more to do, but the steady improvement in participation shows that creating the legacy of the London games is a marathon, not a sprint.

It is not often that I will be positive about Arsenal, but the Prime Minister will be pleased that Arsenal women's team is leading the way in women's football; role models such as Leah Williamson are helping attendance at the Emirates to grow to record levels. The women's team sold out the Emirates several times last season, and average attendance at their games was better than at 10 premier league clubs.

As we move on from the Paris games and turn towards Los Angeles in 2028, another round of great British athletes will inspire more of the next generation. While nothing will compare to the home games delivered by my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Jeremy Hunt) and Boris Johnson as Mayor of London, the most recent games will surely be a springboard allowing a new generation of athletes to begin their ascendancy to the peak of world sport. The official Opposition will hold the Government's feet to the fire to ensure that they support our athletes all the way from Sunday league to the premier league, so that they continue to perform at the pinnacle of world sport, as they have over the past 14 years. In doing so, we remember the crucial role that sport plays in our communities and for our health; I agree with the Minister's comments on that.

I hope that today we will all finally learn more about Labour's plans to fund support for great British sport, and to continue the strong Conservative legacy that the Government have inherited, because sport is about much more than just free tickets.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I have a little tip for the shadow Minister for future speeches: my husband David and daughter Farah are Arsenal fans.

12.46 pm

**Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab):** It is a great pleasure to speak in the debate. May I associate myself with the speech made by my hon. Friend the Minister? She spoke eloquently about the importance of sport to men and women, boys and girls, and particularly to disabled people—everyone—as well as about the lifelong benefits that sport can give. I hope that the whole House will support her endeavours on this important subject.

In the time available to me—many other colleagues want to speak—I will cover three areas. First, I want to pay tribute to Paralympians and Olympians after the summer's success. Secondly, I will highlight some of the wonderful achievements of local sportsmen and women from the Reading area and the importance of grassroots sport in our community. Finally, I will call for the owner of Reading football club to speed up the sale of the club, which is a huge local issue, and I thank my hon. Friend for her unstinting support on this important matter.

I start with the amazing success of our local Paralympians at this summer's Paralympic games. I mention in particular Gregg Stevenson, a Paralympic rower who trains in Caversham, where the British rowing base is. Gregg has been through enormous challenges in life, yet he won gold for GB in the PR2 mixed double sculls. He suffered disability in 2009 while he was a member of the

59 Commando Squadron in the Royal Engineers through a bomb blast in Afghanistan, which caused him to lose both legs. He has come back from that tragedy to become a Paralympic rower. It is important to remember the contribution of our service personnel, as well as other disabled sportspeople. What an amazing achievement for him.

While I have the opportunity, I would also like to mention Ed Fuller, another Paralympic rower training locally who attended the University of Reading. He was one of the crew who won gold for ParalympicsGB in the mixed coxed four events in Paris. I also praise Will Arnott, a Paralympian from our community who plays boccia—an unusual precision ball sport, similar to bowls but less well known—for his hard work and dedication, and his success this summer.

Our Paralympians are all wonderful ambassadors for sport. I thank them from the bottom of my heart for their work for ParalympicsGB to raise the profile of the Paralympics, and para sport in general, among young and older people, both in the Reading area and across the country. I appreciate that colleagues are lining up to speak, but I would like to mention briefly a few prominent sportswomen from our community and say a little about grassroots sports. I thank Fran Kirby for her work in football, including for the Lionesses. She plays for Brighton & Hove Albion now, but she started as a Reading player and went to school locally at Caversham Park primary school. She is much loved in our community, and it is worth paying tribute to amazing stars like her, who blaze a trail for other women. I also thank Amanda Handisides, who is a Team GB ice hockey player, and of course Morgan Lake, who was born in Reading. She is a well-known high jumper who has represented GB on many occasions.

I also mention our wonderful grassroots sports. I cannot do justice to all of them, but I thank our local teams in football, hockey, cricket and many other sports for their enduring work at the grassroots. In a sense, I have to declare an interest: my family and I have benefited from it.

I turn briefly to Reading football club. Let me tell the story of what has happened, and call for action from the owner, Mr Dai Yongge, who has delayed selling the club, which has caused huge problems for fans, players and the club. Reading is one of the oldest clubs in the football league, yet it is in real difficulty. We have had a successful career and an illustrious history over many years, including two spells in the premiership, the highest-ever point tally achieved in the championship and numerous other successes. Sadly, we have never got to an FA cup final, but we have had some amazing cup runs, yet unfortunately our club has fallen into a difficult period because of irresponsible ownership.

Reading's case is similar to that of a number of other clubs, as I know from working with colleagues. I am glad to see that the previous Government's Football Governance Bill has been brought back by our Front-Bench team, and I hope that soon becomes law and deals with the problem of irresponsible ownership, which has been experienced across the country by a number of clubs, many of them in medium-sized towns and cities. I know other colleagues have strong feelings about that.

Before I call for action from Mr Yongge, I point out how difficult this situation has been. The reason why the club has been so badly affected by his ownership is

[Matt Rodda]

repeated financial mismanagement: he failed to pay His Majesty's Revenue and Customs on time and, as a result, points were deducted, meaning that Reading were relegated from the championship to league one. That was not because of anything that happened on the pitch. That is grossly unfair on the club, the players and local fans—it is completely and utterly unacceptable. The same thing could happen to other clubs in the football league in exactly the same way, due to the same issues of irresponsible ownership, and of owners failing to live up to the standards that they should be adhering to.

Sadly, the powers available to the English Football League are not as great as they might be, and I hope that the Bill, which will hopefully come to Parliament shortly, will tackle this and set a high bar for ownership. It is interesting that Mr Yongge was not allowed to buy Hull City; the Premier League was able to intervene to avoid that. The EFL did not have the power at the time to stop him buying Reading, and that is an absolute tragedy for our fans, the players and the club. I hope something can be done about it.

We have been hoping for a sale since last October. The former Member for Bracknell and I attended a march in Reading town centre with several thousand fans last October, and we managed accidentally to stop all traffic on a local A road. The fans sent a strong message to Mr Yongge that he needed to get on with selling the club, finding a preferred bidder and working with them to move things on, so that a new owner could invest in the club. In the last year, the situation has not been properly addressed. He has been in discussion with Rob Couhig, the former owner of Wycombe Wanderers, but sadly that fell through a few days ago. It has been announced that a new preferred bidder has come forward. I urge Mr Yongge to take all reasonable steps to engage with the new preferred bidder quickly, and to conclude a sale, so that we can move on, take our wonderful club forward, and get it back up to the premiership, ideally, though the championship will do for the moment. I urge him to get on with selling the club and to take action on behalf of the people of Reading.

I would like once again to show my appreciation for Olympians and Paralympians. They do amazing work representing this country and are ambassadors for sport across the world. I also thank local sportsmen and women, and young people involved in sport. Finally, once again, I call for a quick sale of Reading FC.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, Max Wilkinson.

12.54 pm

**Max Wilkinson** (Cheltenham) (LD): If, as the shadow Minister says, Government Members are coming out swinging, I promise to play with a straight bat for the next few minutes. [Interruption.] Thank you. I am here all week. [Interruption.] Sticky wickets and all that.

The success of our athletes in Paris is a source of great pride to our country. Every community that had an Olympic or Paralympic athlete rejoiced in the glory of sport for those weeks over the summer. For those communities home to a medallist, the joy was even greater. In Cheltenham, we watched the medal success

of rower Thomas George and equestrian Laura Collett, as well as the efforts of Flora Peel in the field hockey team. Locals feel a sense of pride when we walk past our golden postbox on the High Street in honour of rower Alex Gregory, who won gold in 2012.

The task facing our nation now is to use the legacy of a successful Olympics and Paralympics to unlock the talents of the next generation. The next Keely Hodgkinson or Hannah Cockcroft is out there. Whoever they are, they need the support and access to facilities so they can flourish. On the subject of Hannah Cockcroft, surely nine gold medals is now enough for a major athletics stadium to be named in her honour.

Sports and physical activity can bring so much to our lives. It provides people with a sense of community and purpose, as well as boosting both physical and mental health. It is important that we note that today is World Mental Health Day, and the contribution that sports and physical activity can make to improving our nation's mental health. Indeed, engaging more people in sports and physical activity must be at the heart of our country's public health mission, if we want a utopian future in which the NHS thrives. That may be met by some people with sighs and an assumption that sport is not for them, but we must think more broadly. The traditional discussion focuses on competitive elite sport, and too often that is represented in people's minds by images of elite sportsmen—and it is usually men—on rugby or football fields running into one another, but there is so much more to sport and physical activity. We must view this issue holistically. The risks of not doing so are stark. Almost one third of children and young people are inactive. The 2023 “Healthy Britain” report states:

“Obesity is estimated to cost the UK economy £58bn a year.”

Physical inactivity is associated with a shocking one in six deaths in our country.

It is all too easy to look at this debate through a negative lens. I prefer to look at the positive opportunity, which is measured in the personal and societal gains that can be made. Unlocking the power of sports and physical activity could boost the economy by up to £16.5 billion a year when healthcare savings and GDP growth are taken into account. It can close the equality gap in schools. According to the Youth Sport Trust, 87% of schools say that participation in sport increases pupils' achievement in school. Sport in prisons can even help to cut crime and reoffending—a particular challenge for our nation at this time, thanks to the legacy of the previous Government.

Our nation can and must focus on the future of leisure centres, swimming pools and other grassroots facilities. The Liberal Democrats call for the creation of new critical health infrastructure—that would be the designation for sports and physical activity facilities—helping us all, particularly children and young people, to access pitches, pools and courts in our area, and thereby lowering barriers to taking part in sport and physical activity.

**Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): My hon. Friend makes an important point about grassroots sport. I am proud that we have a thriving grassroots sport scene across Twickenham, but there just are not enough playing fields. Udney Park playing fields in Teddington in my constituency have been lying derelict for more than a decade, having been sold to successive developers, who

quite rightly are not able to develop the site. It is an asset of community value. The community is desperate to purchase that site so that we can bring it back into community sports use. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need a change in the planning laws, to allow communities to bid successfully for such sites?

**Max Wilkinson:** My hon. Friend makes a strong point. That could be critical health infrastructure designated under our party's proposals.

Those pitches, pools and courts have traditionally been provided by local authorities, but the defunding of councils over many years has left many areas struggling to maintain facilities. The running costs of swimming pools are high and the need is acute. The previous Government's swimming pool support fund is a start, and in Cheltenham we have benefited from some investment as a result, but more must be done.

In the case of athletics facilities, a lack of funding in the sector has left local athletics clubs crowdfunding to keep facilities going. I am aware of the success enjoyed by Hereford and County athletics club in saving their track. However, in my own constituency, the Prince of Wales stadium is in dire need of repairs to its track so that the Cheltenham and County Harriers can once again host meetings of the standard that they require. I urge everyone involved in that endeavour to come together and seek a solution in partnership with any willing and able organisations, without delay.

Wider partnership working at local level is certainly required to support grassroots sport, and I pay tribute to the many trusts, charities and clubs that have stepped in to fill gaps in provision left by cuts to local council budgets. In Cheltenham, however, we have one really positive story to tell. The "feed Cheltenham" leisure card, which is run in conjunction with food banks, the Cheltenham Trust and the local council, gives anyone who subscribes to our local food banks free access to our leisure centre, lowering barriers to taking part in sports and physical activity for those most in need.

As a child and a young man, I took inspiration from the sportspeople I saw in front of me: Matthew Le Tissier—whose politics remain his own—Alan Shearer, Tim Henman, Serena Williams, Darren Gough and so many more. Sadly, while I could never match Alan Shearer's goals on the football pitch, I eventually coincided with his hairstyle, and I will take some solace from that. I enjoyed many days at the Dell watching Matt Le Tissier and others, but the majority of my consumption of sports was on free-to-air television. Today, youngsters simply do not have the same opportunity to be inspired. I urge the Government to consider extending free-to-air coverage of international cricket, rugby, golf and tennis, and even extending protection to some live premier league football coverage.

For both sporting and economic reasons, is it not time for London to have its own NFL franchise? Expanding on the success of the London series of games at Wembley and the Tottenham Hotspur stadium, it could bring many hundreds of millions of pounds to our economy every year and bring the joy of NFL to many more fans in this country.

Sport instilled in me a lifelong love of physical activity, which I am extremely grateful for—my arthritic toes are perhaps less grateful. However, that love was most recently indulged during recess at Cheltenham's Man v

Fat football club. The organiser, Jamie Baron, told me how the combination of goals on and off the pitch helped him lose two and a half stone. The club's 38 players have lost a combined 51 kg in the past eight weeks, helping improve their physical and mental health. I was proud to join the Egg Fried Whites team against a side I am told is known as the Lardies in Red. The opportunities that lay before us if we follow their lead and embrace sport for good can help us crack the public health challenge facing our nation. In this debate, I urge Members to think about sport and physical activity not just from the elite sport perspective, but about how it can help us solve the wider challenges, including public health and fixing our NHS.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call Sarah Hall to make her maiden speech.

1.3 pm

**Sarah Hall (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op):** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to address the House for the first time. It is a huge privilege to stand here today representing my home, the constituency of Warrington South. It is an honour I will never take for granted. I come to this place as only the second woman to represent Warrington South. The first, Helen Southworth, was a mentor of mine. Helen's work on runaway and missing children was hugely important. Commenting at the time, she said:

"Someone said to me it was about children below the radar. Our job has been to make sure these children are on it."

I want to continue that work, ensuring that all children across Warrington South feel happy and healthy and are afforded every opportunity to thrive. I will ensure that every child is on our radar.

I also come to this place as the second member of the Hall family to represent Warrington South. The first, my father-in-law Mike Hall, was elected in 1992. Mike was the epitome of what a constituency MP should be: a hard-working campaigner who is remembered fondly for his time in this place. I will forever be grateful for the encouragement and guidance he has given me over the years. During Mike's maiden speech 32 years ago he paid tribute to his son, Thomas. Today in my maiden speech, I pay tribute once again to Thomas—now my husband and father to our two children George and Freya. Today is also another important day—his birthday. I want to put on record a very happy birthday to him, in the hope that gets me back in his good graces. Thomas, George, and Freya are my world, and I would not be in this place without their love and support.

My second name is Edith, which makes me the second Edith to represent Warrington in this place. The first was the formidable Edith Summerskill—the first woman MP to represent Warrington in Parliament. She fought relentlessly on issues close to her heart—for women's rights, against child neglect and for better healthcare provision, to name a few. Having seen from her time as a doctor how poverty led to poor health outcomes, she made it her mission to fight for access to healthcare free at the point of need. Years later, she recalled attending her first confinement as a newly qualified doctor. Shocked at the state of the home and the undernourishment of the mother, whose first child had rickets, she said:

"In that room that night, I became a socialist".



[Sarah Hall]

Following in her footsteps, I want to tackle the root causes of poverty. As a local councillor I worked with many local groups and charities that support residents to make ends meet: the Bread and Butter Thing, Warrington food bank, Bewsey community shop, Warrington citizen's advice bureau and many others. They all do fantastic work, but demand for help is high.

Edith Summerskill wrote many letters to her daughter, who would also go on to become a Labour politician. She wrote in one letter:

"The shades of the women who blazed the trail that you and I might be free to fulfil ourselves seemed to sit with me on the green benches of Westminster last night. I feel now that you in your turn will go forward to destroy finally those monstrous customs and prejudices which have haunted the lives of generations of women."

I put on record my thanks for her work to champion the rights of women, paving the way for future generations of women in this place, in Warrington and across the country.

I also pay tribute to my predecessor, Andy Carter, who served Warrington South from 2019. While he and I are not politically aligned, I know that he worked hard for Warrington South. Being a Member of Parliament brings with it great responsibility, and he did not shirk that responsibility when he served on the Standards and Privileges Committees.

Warrington is the centre of the north-west, or at the centre, sorry—a Freudian slip. Sited at the crossroads of the M6 and M62 motorways, it is strategically important for business and industry. In her maiden speech, Helen Southworth noted:

"We in Warrington, South are innovators".—[*Official Report*, 25 June 1997; Vol. 296, c. 802.]

The first canal to be built in Britain, the Sankey, runs through Great Sankey. With the Mersey, the Bridgewater canal and the Manchester ship canal, it is one of four inland waterways that are significant features and monuments to Warrington's contribution to the industrial revolution. That innovation and ambition continues today.

Warrington South is home to a variety of business sectors. It is home to the world's largest recycler of used beverage cans, Novelis, which provides aluminium for businesses such as Jaguar Land Rover, and DriveWorks, a firm that works with manufacturing and engineering businesses to provide innovative and bespoke design automation and 3D software solutions, selling to countries across the world. Tomorrow I will attend Warrington's annual business conference, where businesses will come together to collaborate and drive forward positive change for our communities. It is fantastic to have so many industries choosing Warrington as their home, but as the MP for Warrington South, I want to ensure that all our children have the skills that they need for the future.

This debate is about sport, which is one of the cornerstones of our communities. In Warrington, rugby league has been a part of our heritage for generations. I am proud to say that my local team, Warrington Wolves, has a well-known supporter from this place—Mr Speaker. Over the years, I have worked to support local grassroots rugby league and the formidable Bank Quay Bulls. Getting involved in your local sports club not only has health and wellbeing benefits, but social benefits too. As a Labour and Co-operative MP, I believe

that community ownership is an obvious model for sport. It gives clubs a financial solution that allows their fans and players a stake and a say in how the club is run. It puts people over profit, ensuring that the needs of the teams, fans and players are always prioritised. Even more powerfully, community ownership gives local sports an identity that is rooted in the community.

With this new Labour Government, we have an opportunity to change the way we think about communities and the role they play. If we built a system that allowed communities to take control of the assets that matter most to them—not just sports clubs, but community centres, pubs, music venues, libraries and so much more—unleashing the power of our communities and giving people a real stake and a say in the assets around them, that could be a defining legacy for the Government. I hope to play my part in realising that.

In the spirit of the pioneering women who have gone before me, I want to make Warrington South an even better place to live, no matter which part of the town you are born in, or your sex, ethnicity or religion: fighting to end child poverty; fighting for the opportunity of a good education for all, for good skilled jobs and decent pay, the opportunity to buy or rent a decent home, to live in a safe neighbourhood free from fear, and to access free healthcare as and when it is needed; and breaking down every single barrier, one at a time.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I, too, wish your husband Thomas a happy birthday. Hopefully, that will get you into the good books. I call the previous Sports Minister.

1.11 pm

**Nigel Huddleston** (Droitwich and Evesham) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I welcome the hon. Member for Warrington South (Sarah Hall) to the House and congratulate her on a very eloquent, gracious and personal maiden speech. She has shown today that she will make great contributions to this place over the coming years. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and my declarations when I was Sports Minister—I may touch on that in a moment. I also take this opportunity to congratulate the Sports Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), and the shadow Sports Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French) on their roles.

As a former Sports Minister, I know that the role has upsides, but it also comes with a lot of hard work and graft. The role often involves dealing with the downsides of sport—regulation, racism in cricket, head injuries in rugby, financial distress and so on—with sports governing bodies, and coming up with solutions in challenging areas such as trans, where we are all trying to ensure we get the right balance between accessibility and fairness and safety. I know how hard governing bodies work on that, and I know that will be a challenging area for the Minister.

There are some upsides, too. I know there is a lot of noise at the moment around declarations and attending sporting events, but as Sports Minister it is the hon. Lady's duty and responsibility to get around the country and be a champion for all sorts of sports. I hope the



noise around that does not stop her from doing her job. That is really important, because not all sporting events are Wimbledon; the job is also about championing disability sports, women's sports and lower league sports around the country. I want to see her at those events every weekend. She will not get criticism from me for doing any of that.

There is another downside to being Sports Minister. On calls with Sports Ministers from around the world, they all introduce themselves as the former world champion of this and the former gold medallist of that. Then it comes to the Brit and it's like, "I've got a medal from sports day at my school back in 1984." Slightly embarrassing! The other downside, I am afraid, is often being required to be in photos along with a lot of very fit, handsome and beautiful people, which is slightly challenging, or being invited to enter the ring to spar with a world champion boxer. I would get asked, "Minister, would you like to participate in the 100 metres final?" with journalists waiting there with cameras just to humiliate you. "No, thank you very much!" But it is an amazing job and one that I enjoyed very much.

If you will allow me, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to say a huge thank you, as I have never had the opportunity to do so. I was appointed Minister for sport and tourism in February 2020. It was the job I had always wanted. A few weeks later, however, we were in lockdown and there was no sport and no tourism. As a result of the work with the various sports governing bodies, in particular Sally Munday and Dame Katherine Grainger at UK Sport, and Tim Hollingsworth at Sport England, and the incredible team at the Department, we were able, over time, to get sport up and running again. I am really proud that we did, because we all know how important it is to health and mental health. And let us not forget that sport is a major economic contributor to the UK. It is a massive export earner for the UK. There are hundreds of thousands of people involved in sport and supported by sport, plus it makes us all feel good and unites us.

That brings me to another point, which the Under-Secretary will find out about at some point in the future, should she ever be unfortunate enough to be reshuffled into a different role. A number of Members would say to me, "We used to like you when you were Sports Minister, but not so much now," because the role is not particularly party political. I am glad that that will be the tone of today's debate.

We should not and cannot take the amazing success of our Olympians and Paralympians for granted, and we are all here to applaud them today. They have put in an incredible amount of personal effort to achieve that success. The United Kingdom punches way above our weight in sport. That is not an accident. I think all of us would applaud the work of John Major, for example, on the initiative back in the 1990s to ensure that money went into sport—which was often controversial—through the national lottery. That has continued ever since. I know how difficult it is to argue for money for sport, but sport is so impactful on the health and mental health of the country.

What incredible success we saw this year, not only in the medal haul, which is important, but in the personal success stories and personal bests. The medals are a really good indicator of our global success, in particular—my God!—that of the Paralympians. They were second

in the medal table again. That speaks volumes of the United Kingdom. We champion people with disabilities: we applaud them and literally put them on a pedestal. The Paralympics is a way to show what people with disabilities can do, as opposed to focusing all on the time on the things they cannot do.

The UK has a fantastic global reputation, in particular for disability sport. I thank everybody involved: not only, as I say, the governing bodies UK Sport and Sport England, but the broadcasters who put the Paralympics on TV at prime time. The British public watched the games in their millions. That is not the case in many other countries around the world. The Under-Secretary is probably being approached by other sports Ministers from around the world saying, "How do you do it? You have incredible success. How did you come second to China in the medal table?" and TV is one of the reasons why.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup said, we are very successful. Back in 1996, we got just one gold medal. We are the only country to have achieved gold medals in every single Olympics in the modern era. That is remarkable, and funding is fundamental to that. From 1996, because of co-operation and taking politics out of a lot of it, we have had a broad consensus on backing sport. Long may that continue.

I would also like to take the opportunity—many of us in the House are very proud of our constituents who participated in the Olympics and Paralympics this year—to applaud Olympic swimmer Matt Richards, Matt Skelhon, Issy Bailey, Rebecca Redfern and Matthew Redfern on their incredible success. I know—I have met them multiple times—that they have very proud parents.

Let us not take sport for granted. We like to applaud our sportspeople for very good reasons. Funding is majorly important. I express my huge gratitude and thanks to the sports governing bodies, UK Sport and Sport England, for what they did during the pandemic when I was Sports Minister, as well as for what they do now. I applaud them; they make us all proud. I applaud the Olympians and Paralympians too. They make us feel good and we are so proud to support them.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I should put on record my thanks to Emily Craig, a gold medallist from my constituency who comes from Mark Cross and for whom Rotherfield recently organised a tea party. If the Minister wants to win a gold medal, she should definitely come to my constituency.

1.19 pm

**Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab):** Let me begin by drawing the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I am sure that Members on both sides of the House will want to join me in sending condolences to the family of George Baldock, the former Sheffield United player who, shockingly, was found dead on Wednesday at the age of just 31. He was a fantastic footballer, who played many times for Greece and was involved in two promotions to the premier league. His death will leave a huge hole for all who supported him, and particularly, of course, for his friends and family.

It is a great pleasure to speak in the debate, and to reflect for a while on the amazing success that we enjoyed in the Olympics. I say well done to everyone

[Mr Toby Perkins]

who represented Great Britain in both the Olympics and the Paralympics. Success in the Olympics requires preparation, and I have no doubt that our team were hugely inspired by our Prime Minister, who remembered to bring a cagoule to the opening ceremony when none of the other world leaders had thought to do so. That may have been the key moment that secured their subsequent successes.

As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on tennis, I want to take this opportunity to bang the drum for tennis, and to focus a little on the future horizon. At the elite level, British tennis has seen huge successes in 2024, including its success at the Paralympics. Alfie Hewett and Gordon Reid won gold in the men's doubles and completed the career golden slam, having won all four of the grand slam events—and now the Paralympics. Alfie Hewett also took home the wheelchair men's singles silver medal, and Andy Lapthorne and Greg Slade won silver in the quad wheelchair doubles.

If there were a prize for the most memorable non-medal-winning moments of the Olympics, the remarkable comeback of Andy Murray and Dan Evans in the first round of the Olympics tennis against Japan, prolonging Andy Murray's amazing career in the process, would have been a strong contender. This year saw Andy lower the curtain on what has been a fantastic playing career. To win three grand slams and 49 main tour events, while sharing an era with the three greatest players ever to engage in the sport, is a tremendous achievement, and I think he will be remembered as one of the greatest athletes in our country's history.

This year also saw coming-of-age moments for Jack Draper, who reached the US Open semi-finals, and Katie Boulter, who won her first WTA 500 event in San Diego and is now comfortably established among the world's top 40 players. There were exciting signs for the future, with Mika Stojanovic winning the US Open girls' singles and Mimi Xu reaching the girls' top 10, Hannah Klugman continuing to establish herself at the top of the girls' game, and, towards the end of the season, a remarkable run of Challenger victories that took Jacob Fearnley into the world's top 100 male players.

Away from the elite level, tennis continues to buck the trend of falling participation that is seen in many sports. Some 5.6 million adults and 3.6 million children play tennis every year, and the strong growth in participation in recent years means that tennis is the third biggest traditional sport in terms of participation. It is also one of the most gender-equal sports, with females representing 42% of adults and 49% of children who play every year, while a range of formats including wheelchair, learning disability, visually impaired, deaf, para-standing and walking tennis provide opportunities for people with a range of impairments to take part in the sport.

There is growing evidence that nothing does more to boost longevity than playing tennis. According to a recent study of people in Copenhagen, those who play tennis live an average of 9.7 years longer than the overall average, outperforming badminton, football, cycling, swimming, and jogging in that regard. You will be glad to know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that these opportunities to enjoy a long and healthy life are also available to Members of Parliament: the thriving APPG on tennis gives them an opportunity to play every week over the summer months here in Parliament.

However, it is important for opportunities to play tennis not to be denied to anyone because of where they live or how wealthy they are, which is why the park project launched by the Lawn Tennis Association, in partnership with the Government, is so important. It involves a nationwide investment of more than £30 million by the UK Government and the LTA Tennis Foundation to transform park tennis courts across Britain and open up the sport to many more people. The LTA's aim is to bring back into use 3,000 courts across Britain spanning 250 local authorities, and to increase participation, with a further half a million people playing tennis in parks annually, and with more than 50% of the sites being transformed in areas of highest social deprivation. The new tennis courts at King George V Park in Staveley are one example of courts, previously in a state of disrepair in a deprived community, that have been brought back into use, and I was delighted to join my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Jonathan Davies), who was then the lead on leisure in Chesterfield Borough Council, in giving them their very first use last summer. This programme's facilities are so transformational that it really needs to be extended by this Government, and I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to work with the LTA on ensuring that it is extended in the upcoming Budget.

Expanding access to tennis is a key objective for the LTA, but it has always been my view that allowing people across the country to watch top tennis players in action is a key part of expanding participation, and I must again express my disappointment that professional tennis in this country continues to happen largely in London and the south-east. The Wimbledon championship is the world's most iconic and well-known tennis tournament, bringing in an estimated £56 million annually and looked forward to by players, fans and sports reporters every year. Britain currently holds main tour men's events at Queen's Club in west London and in Eastbourne, and women's events at Eastbourne, Nottingham and Birmingham. That had already meant that there were no men's main tour events north of west London, but now the LTA has announced that the main pre-Wimbledon women's event will also be at Queen's Club, thus downgrading Birmingham and Nottingham. It is true that the LTA has held a GB Davis Cup week, very successfully, in Manchester for the last two years, but that is not a replacement for a main tour event.

Among our competitors, such concentration of events is unusual. France holds men's main tour events in Montpellier, Marseille, Lyon and Metz as well as in Paris; Germany holds them in five cities; and the United States does so in 11. The picture is similar when it comes to women's events, with the other major countries playing in many different cities. From 2025 onwards, Britain will hold only one event north of London for women and none for men. That is not acceptable. While I recognise that it may be more difficult to run events profitably away from London—although the recent Manchester Davis Cup sell-out was the biggest crowd ever in Britain for a tennis match—I urge the Government and the LTA to sit down and find a way to ensure that professional tennis is not seen only in London and the south-east.

The other big issue for tennis will be the finalising of plans for some lasting legacy from Andy Murray's career. Andy's mother, Judy, has been battling for years to create a new tennis centre near Dunblane, and it was

hugely disappointing when, owing to the many obstacles placed in the way, she recently announced that the plans were being shelved. It is crucial that a lasting legacy is created to mark Andy's amazing career, and to ensure that the increased exposure that his success brought to the sport is not lost.

Tennis is in good heart, Madam Deputy Speaker, and it is good for your heart as well. There is more to do to ensure that the sport is enjoyed at all levels throughout the country, and I hope that the Government and my hon. Friend the Minister will do their bit to keep it growing.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call Vikki Slade to make her maiden speech.

1.27 pm

**Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to make my maiden speech in this uplifting debate to celebrate the success of the Olympics and Paralympics. I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington South (Sarah Hall); I completely agree with her sentiments about children who are beneath the radar, and I will do everything I can to ensure that they are lifted and seen.

One of my happiest family memories is of a trip in 2012 to enjoy the spectacle and the spirit of the London Paralympics in the pool and on the track, a day that surely inspired my own children's passion for and dedication to sport. My constituency can lay claim to Britain's first ever track and field Olympic gold medallist: Charles Bennett, a train driver from Shapwick—otherwise known as the Shapwick Express—won the 1,500 metres in 1900 and took two further medals, but was largely forgotten until his family discovered his achievements more than 100 years later.

My own journey to this place has been more of a marathon than a sprint. It took four attempts for me to win my seat of Mid Dorset and North Poole, my home for 25 years. That journey also started in 2012, when Dame Annette Brooke, the then Liberal Democrat MP, invited me to tea and suggested that I put myself forward as a candidate. I explained that I was just a mum of four running a café and was completely unqualified for the job, having never been to university, and that “people like me did not become MPs”. She simply replied, “That is why you should stand.” Without her faith in me I would not be here, and I hope that I can emulate her work—such as her support for park home owners, protecting Dorset's heathlands and fighting for better education funding—and that I can achieve just a fraction of the deep respect and admiration that our community still feels for her.

I turn to my immediate predecessor, Michael Tomlinson. He was so proud of his legislative roles—first as a Government Whip, then as Solicitor General, and most recently as the Minister for Illegal Immigration. I know that he took these responsibilities very seriously, but not as seriously as his love for cricket. On a recent trip to the Netherlands, he captained the Lords and Commons parliamentary cricket team against their parliamentary team.

My constituency of Mid Dorset and North Poole is made up of dozens of communities, all with their own special character. We are all linked through our landscape,

particularly the Dorset heathlands, which are home to all six of the UK's native reptiles and to ground-nesting birds. It has the most lovely walks, including on Upton heath, known to my social media followers as “my happy place.” The work undertaken by the Dorset Wildlife Trust, RSPB Arne, the National Trust and others to restore our landscapes means that we are one of the only places in the UK to have reversed the decline in nature. Eco-tourism is now supporting economic growth, preserving the way of life in our countryside, towns and villages.

While the beaches are in neighbouring constituencies, our playgrounds are our rivers, but I should stress that that is on the water, not in the water. The navigable River Frome is ideal for a Birds of Poole Harbour boat trip to catch sight of a white-tailed eagle or a deer on the foreshore, or for a sail up to the Anglo-Saxon walled town of Wareham, with its art deco cinema and pretty pubs on the quay, while the smaller River Piddle is perfect for paddling. The River Stour runs down from the north to Wimborne Minster, home to river-based Dreamboats, Canford school's rowing facility and Poole harbour canoe club. I will fight to clean up our rivers and achieve bathing water status at Eye Bridge, where our teenagers already spend their summer days chilling out by the water, and where parents like us taught our kids to kayak. I want to support the amazing people who are working to use our natural environment to improve health and wellbeing through sport—people like Will Behenna, who founded Inclusive Paddleboarding after being paralysed and now helps disabled people enjoy the tranquillity and freedom of the water.

Off the water, Wimborne Minster is named after its ninth-century church and is home to a chained library, a museum with a mummified cat in the walls—apparently for good luck—and an annual folk festival. The Drax and Kingston Lacy estates, and the villages that go out towards Holt Heath, provide the chocolate-box images you read about in Thomas Hardy's literature. According to local legend, much of the content for his novels came from listening to the town's gossip when he lived in Wimborne.

Returning to sport, England saw footballing success and heartbreak this summer with the Euros, but in mid-Dorset we were thrilled that Wimborne Town football club was promoted to the southern league premier south, and that the neighbouring AFC Bournemouth opened its world-class training facility in Bearwood in my constituency, guaranteeing a pipeline of brilliant future Dorset footballers. Mind you, the pedigree is already there, as two of the England under-23 ladies' team came through Broadstone middle school as classmates of my own children.

Given that Olympic trampolinist Izzy Songhurst from Broadstone, champion go-karters and winning sailors, among others, grew up in our constituency, I want to pay particular tribute to the volunteer coaches who make it possible for our children to have these opportunities, as well as to charities such as Dorset Community Foundation, which helps our athletes compete at the highest level or simply lets children take part in what they love.

Every child must be able to thrive, but our current education system stops that happening for so many young people. We have a curriculum that crushes creativity, a SEND system that condemns children to fail, and a



[Vikki Slade]

grip so tight on Ofsted measures that teachers do not have the space to truly share the joy of learning. Some of our children face an even greater battle, including children in care, young carers, children who suffer bereavement, and those with disabilities or life-limiting conditions. We need those children to thrive too, and thanks to charities such as Become, MYTIME Young Carers, Mosaic, Diverse Abilities and Julia's House children's hospice, so many of them do. But with councils facing bankruptcy and unable to deliver much in non-statutory services, and with public donations down due to the cost of living, they need action from the Government to secure proper funding.

As an MP, my voice is my power, and I will use it to fight for them, and for all who strive to improve the lives of those who feel voiceless. I also want to send a message to people in my community who feel powerless, and to young people who are worried about the future: if you want something badly enough, keep trying. It is possible, whatever your background, your gender and your struggles. Like me, you might take the long route, but like my famous country "mum walks", the long ones are where you stumble across the most interesting places and create lasting memories.

Like many people, I have a bucket list. It has just three things on it: to run the London marathon, to earn a degree, and to represent my community as a Member of Parliament. Well, Dad, I finally achieved one of them. Although he is not here in the Chamber today—he is watching at home—I hope he is proud. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

I still pinch myself about being in this place. I am just a mum with four fabulous kids—Molly, Abbi, Isaac and George—and my long-suffering husband Paul. I have an incredible team of volunteers who keep believing in me, and a community who have put their trust in me to speak up for them. I want everyone living in Mid Dorset and North Poole, from Shitterton to Happy Bottom—yes, they are real places—and from Gaunt's Common to Canford Heath, to know that they have a champion in me, and to know that I am committed to making the places that we all call home the best they can be.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** The *Hansard* reporters will definitely need your speech to make sure the spellings are correct. I call Sarah Coombes to make her maiden speech.

1.36 pm

**Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab):** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is an honour to make my maiden speech today in a debate that recognises the contribution of sport to our national life, and to follow two such inspiring maiden speeches.

For most people, when they hear the words "West Bromwich", the next word they think of is "Albion." Unfortunately, that did not prove true for the Boundary Commission, which put The Hawthorns in the next-door constituency. But that does not change the special place that West Bromwich Albion holds in the hearts of my constituents. Our historic club puts us on the map, is one of the 12 founding members of the football league and, until last Tuesday night, was top of the championship table—let's not talk about what has happened since.

Madam Deputy Speaker, if you had looked up into the West Bromwich sky in 1878, when the team was first formed at George Salter spring works, what you would have seen all around you were clouds of black smoke coming from the forges, foundries and ironworks that powered the industrial revolution. If you had dug down into our earth, you would have found a black coal seam that fed our factories. That is how the Black Country got its name. We really were the engine room of Britain. And of course, in manufacturing towns such as mine, some of the most important people are the toolmakers. During the election, I must have met dozens of sons and daughters of toolmakers all over West Bromwich—and yet, strangely, none of them mentioned it.

In West Bromwich, we are rightly proud of our industrial history, and that legacy lives on today in the vibrant manufacturing businesses in the area, from the fourth-generation family steel press company, William King—which supplies one of our midlands greats, Jaguar Land Rover—to Robinson Brothers, a chemical company that manufactures the tasty aroma you can smell when you open a jar of coffee, as well as the less tasty but safety-critical smell when you turn on your gas hob.

After the war, Britain needed workers from across the empire to staff our factories, foundries and newly formed NHS. People from all over the world—India, Pakistan, the Caribbean and more—answered that call. They made their homes in West Bromwich, Oldbury, Tividale, Rowley and Great Barr. They put down roots, often against the odds.

I recently went to the Shree Krishna mandir for its 50th anniversary celebration. People told stories and showed films of all those who struggled, fundraised and worked so hard to get the temple built and secure a base for the community. When I think about the landscape of my constituency, as well as the industrial skyline, the Rowley hills and beautiful Red House park, I think of the domes, minarets and spires of our places of worship. They include the langar hall of Guru Har Rai Saheb gurdwara, which offers free meals to all; the Sikh helpline based upstairs, which assists anyone who dials its number; the majestic Balaji temple; the grand All Saints church in Oakham, which is perched on top of the hill; and the Dartmouth Street mosques. They are an essential part of what makes my area what it is today: an exciting, creative and welcoming place.

One of my old bosses, Sadiq Khan, used to say, "Our diverse communities don't want to be tolerated; they want to be celebrated." In my borough of Sandwell, that is how we do it. We do not just tolerate each other's differences; we celebrate our cultural diversity. I was proud to show Sadiq around West Brom during the election campaign, and I think he was asked for more selfies there than he was in London. The thing I did not get to show him, but that I do love showing visitors, is our wonderful food scene, particularly our famous desi pubs, such as the Vine, the Rowley Bar and Grill, and the Red Lion. Not only is the food so good at the Red Lion that it is impossible to get a table on Saturday nights; it also has beautiful stained-glass windows that tell the story of Punjabi immigration to the area.

What I love about Black Country people is the warmth, straightforwardness and willingness to get stuck in, whether that means the attendees at the regular cheese and wine afternoons at the Yew Tree community centre or the hundreds of people at my beloved Sandwell

Valley parkrun every Saturday. I have noticed that the modern version of the tradition of each Member claiming to have the best constituency is now to claim the best and most beautiful parkrun, but I really do think that my own surely wins that prize—although the killer hills do not make it one for a PB.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to another parkrunner, my predecessor, Nicola Richards. Nicola worked really hard for the area—from her steadfast support for Albion fans and championing of an English football regulator, to arranging careers fairs for young people—and she was well respected for it. Our political culture can be adversarial, but Nicola and her team have been very generous with their time and advice since the election, which I really appreciate—they have even given us some of their office furniture.

I would like also to take this moment to mention Nicola's predecessor, a big figure in this house over many years, Tom Watson. Tom taught me many things: that people will think it is weird if you put butter in your coffee, that party civil wars are good for drastic weight loss, and that you probably should not call other Members of this House "miserable pipsqueaks". He also taught me that the House of Commons can be an incredibly powerful agent for change, and that sometimes you just have to be brave. Tom was a fierce champion for West Brom and he was never scared to stand up for those who needed him. If he had not encouraged me with his sincere belief that being a young woman was a good and great advantage in a parliamentary candidate, I doubt I would be standing here today.

I know what an honour and a responsibility it is to be sent here to represent my constituents. I come here to bang the drum for West Bromwich, Oldbury, Great Barr, Tividale and Rowley, and to demand the change my area needs. I will be a champion for our great midlands manufacturing businesses, which have so much to contribute to Labour's national growth mission. That includes being on the cutting edge of green innovation, whether through getting solar panels installed on our acres of factory roofs or setting up training hubs for good green jobs. I worked at an environmental charity immediately before getting elected, and I think the task of shoring up Britain's energy security and driving down emissions is an urgent one that is full of opportunity.

Sandwell is a great place to live and work, but we face real challenges. Deprivation and poverty are too high, with families working hard but not being able to make ends meet. GP appointments feel impossible to get, buses are unreliable and our young people are not getting the chances they deserve. Almost half of children in Sandwell are leaving school without the qualifications to get an apprenticeship or go to college or university, and of all the boroughs in the UK, ours is the one with the highest proportion of people with no qualifications at all. It is a core aim of this new Government to break down barriers to opportunity; and for us, that mission is not just timely, but urgent.

Let me end with one of my earliest memories: standing with my mum outside Sainsbury's, handing out Labour stickers on the day of the 1997 general election. Thanks to my parents, even at the tender age of six I think I was aware that it was a moment of great national excitement and optimism about the future. Today our country faces huge challenges, but I am certain that just as the last Labour Government changed Britain, this new one

will bring growth and opportunity right across our nation. It will be my job to be the voice and champion of the people of West Bromwich constituency as we deliver that mission, and I hope I can do them proud.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call Ben Maguire to make his maiden speech.

1.44 pm

**Ben Maguire** (North Cornwall) (LD): Many congratulations to the hon. Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) on an excellent maiden speech.

It is the greatest honour of my life to be giving my maiden speech in this place as the Member for my home constituency of North Cornwall, where I was born and brought up. I will always be grateful to the people of North Cornwall for putting their trust in me. There are unfortunately too many supporters, friends and family to thank for their hard work and dedication in getting me to this place, but I must say a special thanks to my mother, Jennifer, my father, Joseph, and my husband, Manuel, for their unwavering love and support; and a huge thank you to my agent and sister, Rosie. To every single member of my campaign: you are quite simply the best team that any candidate could wish for and you have showed such amazing dedication to our area. I would not be here without you and I will not let you down.

It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate celebrating our Olympic and Paralympic athletes. I grew up in the small but now golden rural village of Withiel, and soon after my election, my former Withiel neighbour, Morgan Bolding, won gold in the men's eight rowing. I commend Morgan and all our Team GB Olympic and Paralympic athletes for their amazing successes this summer.

I would like to pay tribute to my predecessor, Scott Mann, who supported much-needed transport initiatives, such as better rail connectivity to north Cornish towns. I will continue that work by fighting for much-needed transport infrastructure, because despite North Cornwall's large size, it does not contain a single mainline rail station, and vital bus routes are routinely cut. I thank Scott for his service and wish him the very best for his future endeavours.

North Cornwall has a great Liberal tradition, so I would also like to pay tribute to my Liberal predecessor, John Pardoe, who is still fondly remembered on many doorsteps for his dedication as North Cornwall's MP in the 1960s and '70s. In more recent times, Paul Tyler and Dan Rogerson were fantastic Liberal Democrat representatives who fought tirelessly for our area. I was honoured to receive the support and advice of all three former Members during my election campaign. They have set the bar very high indeed.

Although the election campaign was mostly a positive experience, we did have one crisis moment. Having advertised a meet and greet where cream teas would be sold, the real dangers of AI were brought home to me: a volunteer, producing the event poster using ChatGPT or something similar, had found a photo of a cream tea—but, tragically, it was a dystopian Devon version, with the cream on first and the jam on top. Before anyone had spotted this egregious error, it had been published all over my social media. As a proud Cornishman, it was indeed a shameful moment and we immediately

[Ben Maguire]

went into crisis mode. Luckily, we survived that unfortunate episode, and I will be sure that I am never again associated with any cream tea that is not jam first.

While preparing for this speech, I read those of my predecessors and noted the tragic resonance they still have today. John Pardoe, back in 1966, described our area as “neglected” and

“exporting a mass of young people.”—[*Official Report*, 25 April 1966; Vol. 727, c. 423.]

In 1974, Paul Tyler explained:

“The housing shortage is now a major social evil again”,—[*Official Report*, 12 March 1974; Vol. 870, c. 144.]

and in 2005, Dan Rogerson said:

“North Cornwall has more second homes than council houses”—[*Official Report*, 18 May 2005; Vol. 434, c. 215.]

As a young person, I felt that I had no choice other than to leave and seek opportunities elsewhere, so I talk from experience when I say that those statements all sadly remain just as true today. Working to bring well-paid, highly skilled jobs to our area will be at the top of my to-do list.

With the new Government’s pledge to build more houses, I will be fighting to make sure that we do not continue to just see more and more executive homes without the appropriate infrastructure, and which are far beyond the reach of local people. I sincerely hope that my future successor does not need to again lament the appalling state of Cornish housing 60 years from now. Everyone in Cornwall must have a safe and secure place to live.

I must admit that since my election, I have been shocked by the number of crises facing our great duchy. My inbox is bursting with cases of children needing urgent treatment in A&E due to tooth infections, with some parents even resorting to using pliers to extract their child’s rotten teeth because they cannot get an NHS dentist. GP appointments continue to be hard to come by, pharmacies are closing and waiting times are among the highest in the country. The major hospitals serving North Cornwall—Treliske, Derriford and North Devon—are crumbling. We cannot delay or review their new buildings any longer, else we risk the south-west’s hospital provision quite literally collapsing.

As well as the crises in our NHS, Cornish schools continue to receive less funding per pupil than schools in other areas of the UK, and the crisis in provision for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities is extremely alarming.

We see raw sewage being dumped into our rivers and world-renowned beaches, such as Polzeath, Harlyn and Widemouth Bay, among many others, on an almost daily basis. The water industry needs urgent reform, so that monopolistic, for-profit water companies are finally forced to invest in infrastructure rather than prioritising only shareholder dividends.

Our fishers and farmers continue to suffer from disastrous trade deals that have left them struggling to compete, and climate change has become the most urgent issue of our time, threatening to submerge towns such as Bude in the coming decades.

Despite these hardships, there is much to be hopeful about. I am deeply inspired by the dedication of our amazing communities, volunteer networks and sports

clubs. I will name a few. There is Age Concern in Bodmin, and the amazing new youth centre in Bodmin, KBSK, which provides warm meals, homework clubs and a range of activities for young people. The sea pool in Bude is run by dedicated volunteers to improve the mental wellbeing of local residents. The memory café in Launceston provides respite for carers and those with memory problems. The Grace Project in Wadebridge distributes unwanted clothing to those who need it most, and there are also the community larders and food banks in Camelford, St Columb Major and Padstow.

My constituency is also blessed with many excellent sports clubs, including Wadebridge Camels rugby club, Bodmin Town football club, Launceston All Blacks rugby club and many more. I look forward to visiting the Kilkhampton ladies football club in a few weeks’ time.

It is clear to me that the best way to solve many of the problems and unique challenges that Cornwall faces is for decisions to be taken locally. My constituents, including many who did not vote at all, are fed up with the same broken political system, which, as I explained, seems to achieve very little for us in Cornwall. That is why, in addition to proper voting and fundamental political reform, I will be calling for meaningful devolution of powers, funding and responsibility from Whitehall to a Cornish legislative assembly.

Cornwall’s unique culture, heritage and language were finally recognised in 2014, when the Liberal Democrats ensured that the Cornish were granted national minority status under the European framework convention, just like the Scots, Welsh and Irish. As Liberal Democrats, we are and must continue to be the party for Cornwall. Given the subject of today’s debate, I hope the Minister will work with me to explore how we can see a Cornish team competing at the next Commonwealth games.

I finish with the words of my 15th-century predecessor, Thomas Flamank, who, like me, had previously been a solicitor and grew up in Bodmin. I hope that is where the similarities end, as he was executed soon after. He led the Cornish rebellion of 1497 and famously said:

“Speak the truth, and only then can you be free of your chains.”

Guided by those words, I will always speak truth to power on behalf of North Cornwall. Kernow bys vyken. Cornwall forever.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** It is important to be procedurally correct in the Chamber, and the procedure is: cream first and jam second.

1.53 pm

**Kirith Entwistle (Bolton North East) (Lab):** I associate myself with the comments of colleagues in expressing my immense pride at the achievements of Team GB athletes at the Paris Olympic and Paralympic games this year. Their recent triumphs have sparked joy and, no doubt, inspired many across the UK, and they serve as a powerful reminder of sport’s deep impact on our lives, particularly for the young people in my Bolton North East constituency.

At a time when the youth voice census shows that our young people do not feel like they belong, with only three in 10 saying that they have a local role model, our athletes have never been more important. They serve as



living examples of the relentless pursuit of excellence, setting high standards and working tirelessly to achieve them.

Cindy Ngamba, who lives in the heart of Bolton and is here today, made history at the Paris Olympics as the first medal winner for the refugee team. Her journey from seeking refugee status to standing on the Olympic podium is nothing short of extraordinary. I congratulate her once again on her historic achievement.

It was in Bolton that Cindy discovered her passion for boxing. She trained tirelessly at Bolton Lads and Girls Club, juggled multiple jobs to stay afloat and overcame immense challenges, including the constant terrifying threat of deportation. Cindy's story has had a profound impact on me and the youth of Bolton. Schools across our constituency have invited her to speak, and she has inspired countless young people to pursue their passions, no matter the hurdles they may face. Cindy is one of Bolton's own, and it is my sincere hope that she will be able to join Team GB for the Los Angeles Olympics in 2028. I will be writing to the Home Secretary to seek clarity on the status of her application.

Following the Paris Olympics, we have seen a 260% spike in demand for sports across the UK and in our community. The success of Team GB has had a real and visible impact. When Ben Sandilands set a new world record in the T20 1,500 metres, more people laced up their trainers for Queen's Park junior park run. When Sky Brown battled back from injury to win skateboarding bronze, we saw more spirited matches and greater attendance at Bolton Lads and Girls Club.

It is in these local settings that young people see the benefits of fitness at first hand and build a real passion for staying active. They join local teams, represent their schools or communities, and even participate in local tournaments, where all the talent Bolton has to offer is on show.

Sport is more than competition, it is a force that inspires the values we hold dear—a genuine love for staying active, perseverance through adversity and the relentless pursuit of excellence. It is also an amazing force for community creation, something that brings us together and gives us a sense of belonging. These are not just athletic virtues; they are life lessons that resonate across the UK, especially in Bolton North East.

When someone joins a club, they join a passionate group of people who are committed to seeing them succeed. Whether they are representing a school like Sharples secondary school, a professional team like the mighty Bolton Wanderers or a larger sporting community like Bolton Indian sports club, they have a network, a family and a support system.

I believe that clubs are a key part of tackling loneliness in our local areas. Research by Better, the social enterprise charity, has found that running in the open air is as effective as socialising with friends and family in reducing feelings of loneliness. More than two thirds of young people taking part in the Youth Sport Trust's "Active in Mind" programme report that it helps them to cope better with their mental health. I truly believe that this Labour Government can continue that inspiration for young people, so that we see more incredible athletes like Cindy come out of amazing places like Bolton North East.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** We are all in awe of Cindy. That was a very powerful speech.

1.58 pm

**Bobby Dean** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I have enjoyed this debate, the maiden speeches and hearing about all the local successes that added up to our national success at this year's Olympic and Paralympic games. We might be a small island, but we punch above our weight.

My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) talked about the Paralympic coverage on Channel 4, which was fantastic, but others have mentioned how sport is increasingly going behind paywalls, which will limit people's opportunity to be inspired. We need to make sure that the crown jewels of British sport, both domestic and international competitions, remain free to air as much as possible, even if only for a single fixture each season or the biggest fixture in that sport. We need to make sure that all sports are available on free-to-air, and we need to make sure that we do not push too many behind paywalls.

Grassroots investment is important to making sport, in all of its diversity, available and inclusive for all potential players. I am lucky enough to still play football on Saturdays. At the age of 34, I can find a standard that fits me, but others are not able to find a suitable standard. My wife is looking to play football but she does not have many options; she would have to play at highly competitive level or not at all. Inclusivity in women's football does not seem to be happening in the right way at the moment.

There have been concerns about access to different sports by people from different backgrounds. There has been a worrying trend towards people from privileged backgrounds, who may have been educated at private schools, ending up as our elite athletes. Quite a high proportion of our competitors this year were from such backgrounds. We need to ensure a diversity of people, from all walks of life, get into sport so that everybody has the opportunity to make it at an elite level.

Finally, I pay tribute to an athlete who has done more for disability sports than most: I congratulate six-time paralympic gold medallist and constituency local hero David Weir on his inspiring career. I wish him a very happy retirement from international sport, as his last race was at the Paris games. David's journey began in Wallington—more precisely, on the Roundshaw estate, in my area—and he first represented Sutton in wheelchair athletics at the London youth games. His talent quickly became evident as he won the junior event at the prestigious London marathon.

David's path has not always been easy. At his first Paralympics in Atlanta in 1996, he remembers feeling disheartened by the meagre turnout of spectators for his sport, only being able to spot five or so people in the crowd that day. In 2002, David won his first London marathon. He reflected on that moment, sharing that he had no sponsorship deals or media coverage, and was left feeling overlooked and undervalued. Fast forward to the London 2012 Paralympics. As he did his victory gold medal lap around the track, he looked up at a roaring stadium full of thousands of supporters, highlighting not only his personal journey but the evolving landscape of disability sports.

Despite these achievements, David has been candid about the challenges that still exist. He continues to advocate for greater visibility and support for Paralympic

[Bobby Dean]

athletes, noting that the gap between the perception of the Paralympics and the Olympics remains significant. In the community of Carshalton and Wallington, we are taking important steps. The David Weir leisure centre in St Helier offers inclusive cycling lessons for individuals of all abilities, fostering an environment where everyone can participate. Sutton and Epsom rugby club is to host an international visually impaired rugby tournament on the weekend of 23 November.

However, we cannot ignore the broader challenges that remain. Data from the Activity Alliance reveals that disabled adults are twice as likely to be physically inactive, compared with their non-disabled peers. Statistics show that many disabled individuals face barriers to spectating sports because of inaccessible venues and prevailing attitudes. That data shows we must ensure the legacy of Team GB includes a commitment to encouraging investment and support for disability sports. It is vital that we ensure everyone, regardless of ability, has the opportunity to engage in sports and physical activity. I know that David will continue to be a champion for this cause and I hope I can support the expansion of disability sports in my own small way in this House.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call Andrew Cooper to make his maiden speech.

2.3 pm

**Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire), who gave a passionate if controversial maiden speech. It is also a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Sarah Hall), whose father-in-law is one of my predecessors as MP for Northwich. I pay tribute to Mike Hall, whose contribution towards getting the funding we needed to stop the town sinking into a big hole of subsidence was vital.

I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to the House for the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this important debate on sport, following the incredible achievements of our Olympians and Paralympians at this year's games. We are lucky enough to have a great record of sporting success in Mid Cheshire. Our own Paula Radcliffe, who needs no introduction, achieved incredible feats in athletics over her long career, smashing the marathon world record.

Northwich rowing club's Matt Langridge won gold at Rio in the men's eight. The club, which has a proud tradition of breaking the perception of rowing as an elitist sport, told me about the "Matt Langridge" effect, as more young people have taken up the sport with that club than ever before.

And this year, the awe-inspiring Poppy Maskill, from Middlewich, who was mentioned by the shadow Minister, not only swam her way to five medals, a world record and the accolade of being the most successful British athlete at this year's Paralympics, but was given the honour of being the GB flagbearer at the closing ceremony.

I cannot leave this list without mentioning my mum, who got the running bug after I was born—I do not think the two are related—and went on to win the gold medal in the 10,000 metres at the European veterans championships in 2013. All these athletes, and others

like them, have been an inspiration to the next generation of runners, rowers and swimmers. It is fitting that we honour them and their achievements today.

It is a tremendous honour to have been elected to represent Mid Cheshire, and our three great and historic salt towns of Northwich, Winsford and Middlewich. The last constituency to bear the name—back then, a two-member constituency with a strong pedigree of electing men with beards and the same surname—was abolished in 1885. Thanks to 139 years of boundary changes, I now pay tribute to not one but four predecessors.

Mid Cheshire gained the village of Rudheath from the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey), who has represented the area since 2017. I thank her for her service. It seems that Rudheath's loss is Lymm's gain, and I am sure the people of Lymm can look forward to many years of common-sense solutions to the challenges they face.

Middlewich was transferred from Congleton, formerly represented by Fiona Bruce. She served as a Member of this House for 14 years and, prior to that, as a councillor in Warrington for six years, a remarkable 20 years of public service that is testament to Fiona's character. I know her former constituents appreciated her hard work and advocacy on their behalf, and her focus in Parliament on championing the right to freedom of religion and belief. I pay tribute to her as a campaigner for better transport infrastructure in her constituency, something on which I hope to build in my time here.

I gained Winsford from the former constituency of Eddisbury, represented by Edward Timpson from 2019, who prior to that served as the Member for Crewe and Nantwich. Edward's outstanding work on improving the life chances of fostered children will undoubtedly shape his political legacy. Edward said in an interview in 2014 that he would not have been Children's Minister and he would not have been a family lawyer if his parents had not fostered. He may no longer be a Member of Parliament, but I am certain we have not seen the last of Edward's contribution to public life.

Finally, I pay tribute to my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Runcorn and Helsby (Mike Amesbury), who has represented Northwich these past seven years. Colleagues from across the House will know of his loyalty and his diligence, as well as his successful campaign from Opposition to make school uniforms cheaper for all. He has been unfailingly kind and supportive towards me, and extremely generous with his time and sound advice. I was until recently a councillor in Northwich, so I know at first hand how assiduously my hon. Friend worked on behalf of his former constituents, and how highly regarded he is locally. He certainly leaves some big shoes to fill.

Each of my predecessors would have been a worthy custodian of the constituent parts that now form Mid Cheshire, but these areas are not just names on a map—they are vibrant communities, each with its own natural beauty, rich history and promising future. The towns of Northwich, Middlewich and Winsford were predicated on the salt industry. From the Roman era to the industrial revolution, these towns have been shaped by the salt deposits found beneath their foundations and their strategic location at the confluence of several waterways that have been exploited to support trade, transport and our communities' growth.

In the best tradition of British innovation, the people of Mid Cheshire have found interesting things to do with the holes in the ground after the salt has been removed. The Adelaide mine in Northwich once hosted a banquet for Emperor Nicholas I of Russia, with over 10,000 candles illuminating the orange crystal banqueting hall, all 130 feet below the surface. Today, the Winsford salt mine keeps the nation's secrets, with over 33 km worth of papers from the National Archives stored safely underground, while just outside Middlewich, preparations are well under way to store the hydrogen produced by Cheshire's Hynet project in the salt seam below.

The salt mines, canals and rivers that run through my constituency have played a pivotal role in shaping the local economy and culture and each has left an indelible mark on our landscape and identity. But these towns are not just about salt and their storied past; today, they are thriving places that are built on resilience, innovation and community spirit.

Northwich is a vibrant town with an exciting and lively events programme. The Now Northwich international dance and street arts extravaganza has delighted visitors with giant insects, peacocks, princesses and rainbow butterflies, while the annual Piña Colada festival, inspired by Northwich-born Rupert Holmes's song "Escape", which I will not provide a rendition of now, has become an important fixture of life in the town centre.

These events and dozens more like them would not be possible without the council, local businesses, rotarians and community groups all pulling together and supporting the town centre to make it the events capital of Cheshire. There is pride in our community, with people willing it to succeed in the face of 14 years of managed decline under the previous Government.

It was in Northwich in 1933 that polythene was accidentally discovered by ICI researchers, and, in Winsford today, we have companies dealing with that industrial legacy, eliminating single-use plastics and recycling them. Indeed, Winsford is home to more than 200 innovative companies, from creators of advanced tissue-healing technologies to developers of a sophisticated AI model to keep people safe from plant and equipment on construction projects all over the world. But the true lifeblood of Mid Cheshire lies in its people. They are compassionate, friendly, and proud of their heritage. They are people like Julie, Diane or Matthew, running charities to help people with Down's syndrome, autism, and muscular dystrophy. They are people like John, Alan or Janet, volunteering hours of their time to keep the parks and the streets of Winsford, Northwich and Middlewich looking their best. They are people like Catherine and Ant who have kept our community fed, and people like Gale and Jess who have helped more people in Winsford than I could begin to count. They and hundreds like them are at the heart of our community. They are the custodians of our history, and the architects of our future, and, despite the challenging times that we are facing, I am convinced that it is a future filled with promise and possibility.

I have long believed that the people of our three great Mid Cheshire salt towns, and, indeed, our country, want a Government who are on their side. They want politics and politicians to serve them, to end the chaos and dysfunction of Westminster and to rebuild our country. The key mission of this Labour Government is to restore trust in politics, to show that politics can be a

force for good, and to demonstrate that politics and politicians can deliver for people and change lives for the better.

I promise always to do my best to serve and represent my constituents, to work tirelessly to deliver the change that people have voted for, and to repay the trust that the people of Mid Cheshire have placed in me.

2.12 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow all the Members who have spoken so far, particularly those who have made their maiden speeches. The hon. Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper), who has just made his, mentioned his predecessor, Fiona Bruce. She and I were good friends, and I thank him for his tribute to her.

Like you, Madam Deputy Speaker, I like my scones with jam first and then cream. I do not know whether that way is favoured in Devon or in Cornwall. Whichever it is, it does not really matter, because that is the way that I like them.

I just want to thank Members for their lovely comments and their maiden speeches. I have said this before, but I think it is right that I should say it again: we are greatly enriched in this House when Members make their maiden speeches. Each one brings their own particular qualities, skills and experiences to this House, and that contributes to the debates that we have and, ultimately, to the legislation that we make. Hopefully, that can all be very positive.

What a season it has been for sport in Northern Ireland! I am probably going to gush with pride—if I can do that—for all those who have done so well. We are on a roll. There have been some wonderful achievements this season. I thank the Minister, who is no longer in her place, for her introduction to this debate and for setting the scene so well. I also thank the shadow Minister.

There has not been an Olympic gold medal winner in Northern Ireland for 36 years, since Stephen Martin and Jimmy Kirkwood were members of the Great Britain hockey team in Seoul. Our last solo gold medal was in Munich when the legend that is Dame Mary Peters won the pentathlon in 1976. I was 21 years of age then. I had a full head of hair—how I wish I could have that back, but that is not going to happen. I waved goodbye to that a number of years ago.

What an Olympics we have had this year. Northern Ireland returned home with four gold medals, one silver medal and two bronze medals. Let me put that medal tally into perspective. Northern Ireland has a population of 1.8 million, and our athletes dominated the world stage four times in one Olympic games. That takes work and dedication, but more than that, it takes heart and determination. To say that I was proud is an understatement—I was inspired. Indeed, every person in Northern Ireland was inspired, and I hope that some of that inspiration that those athletes gave to us in Northern Ireland was shared across all of this United Kingdom. Inspiration is the goal of each of those medal winners; they hope to inspire the next generation of swimmers, rowers and gymnasts. All of us wish to see the generation coming on as the gold medal winners of tomorrow.

I was very honoured to be at a reception in Newtownards, where we congratulated two gold medal Olympians who trained and lived in our borough. We had Jack



[Jim Shannon]

McMillan, who was part of the gold medal-winning relay team, GBNI, which trained in Bangor Aurora complex in our constituency. Jack's presence at his home council event was to tell others that, with hard work and dedication, they could achieve such things. He was V-shaped from his waist to his shoulders. The strength was all in his arms, and it was quite clear why he was such a good swimmer.

Then we had young Rhys McClenaghan from Newtownards, who has always had a special place in my heart. I have supported him from a young age, and this year he finally brought home the gold for the pommel horse gymnastics event—one of the hardest disciplines. Everything is done on two hands. I could not stay for three seconds on my two hands, never mind bounce about and do all the things that he does. He is fantastic. I watched him, because I have known him for years. I also knew his mother and father very well. A slip of a finger had prevented his victory in Tokyo just four years ago, and I remember the disappointment that he and his family felt. But we all cheered him on as he won the Commonwealth games, the world championships and the European championships.

Like everybody else in Newtownards, I just knew that Rhys would win the gold in Paris, which he did. We cheered until we were hoarse—just as everybody else does for their people. We decorated the windows of the shops in his hometown of Newtownards, and put up posters and banners. We took such pride in one of our own smashing all the ceilings on the world stage. That inspired children and helped them to see that if Rhys McClenaghan can do that, so can they. That was incredible for the young boys and girls. The schools talked about it and the parents raved about it. There was a palpable sense of joy. Rhys's victory belongs to all of us in Newtownards. I would like to quote his post on Facebook after the celebration:

"My Home, Newtownards. I brought you home our first ever Olympic Medal".

He did, and that inspired all of Newtownards and, indeed, all of Northern Ireland.

This humble young man is determined to show that his joy is our joy. I have been watching his progress over some 15 years, and, as an MP, I have regularly sent him letters. I send letters to many people to encourage them, because, obviously, that is the right thing to do. I have sent handwritten letters, which, given my writing, is a challenge for many people. When I asked Rhys whether he had got my letters, he said, "Oh, I got all the letters." But when I asked him whether he could read them, he said, "Well, Jim, that was the real challenge, but I think it was good news you were telling me anyway".

Rhys is a young fellow who has done so well. His aim is to encourage young people to work towards their dream. He was clear that there had been failures. Tokyo did not work out, but Paris did. Getting up and trying again is what secured him his accolades, and it is what enables all of us to achieve success. The hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) said in her maiden speech that she had attempted to win her seat four times. That tells me: if you do not achieve something the first time, do it again, and you will do better. Our young people need that message of hope and persistence more than ever.

As I have said to some of the Olympians I met, when they win gold, silver or bronze, they are the best, second best or third best in the world, and if they finish in fourth place, they are the fourth best in the world. They might not have got a medal, but that is also quite an achievement. I say that because Barry McClements swam in the Paralympics. He got a bronze medal last time in Tokyo. He did not get a medal this time, but he beat his personal best. He swam quicker this time than he did the last time, but he did not get a medal. I said to him, "You're the fourth best in the world."

When we try to inspire children to take up sport, we follow in the footsteps of Mary Peters, who for the last almost 50 years has presented children in Northern Ireland with a goal and a determination to give their all. That to me is the real glitter that comes from gold medals. It is the reason Rhys McClenaghan and his business partner Luke opened their gym and training facility in their hometown of Newtownards and offered every boy and girl who came to them a free gymnastics lesson to encourage them to be active, and to see what they might enjoy. It is the reason Mary Peters has spent some 50 years at school sports days and awards—to encourage children to dare to dream. It is the reason we in this House need to play our part, as I am sure we all do, to encourage sports by funding sports development—particularly in Northern Ireland, where parents of athletes such as Rhys sacrifice tens of thousands of pounds to see their son succeed.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean) referred to an athlete from his constituency who had no sponsorship for many years but still succeeded. That is what parents and families do. We need to provide assistance, and build on these medals so that we have a generation of world-class athletes, proud to represent their home towns and countries. The power lies in this House to inspire everyone across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Let us meet the gold standard, fund our sports and athletes, and be proud of our nation, punching well above our weight. When Rhys McClenaghan was asked for a word to describe his experience, he said "golden". Let us see how many more golden moments we can get for our children.

2.22 pm

**Rachel Taylor** (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): What a privilege and pleasure it is to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), with whom, I am sorry to say, I share a preference for cream teas.

I am very proud to have one of the world's best golf courses in my constituency—the Belfry. I was delighted to join those at the course recently at the British Open to talk about its work in encouraging young people into golf. I am privileged to co-chair the all-party parliamentary group for sport; I have taken over from my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater). One of my aims will be to ensure that we work with sporting bodies and organisations to push for more people to become physically active, and for more people to be given the opportunity to enjoy playing sport in their local communities and at the highest level. We have had a brilliant summer of sport, with Team GB ending the Paris Olympics and Paralympics with more medals than ever. In my sport of tennis, which my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) spoke about so eloquently, British players did so well at the US Open.

I am so proud of our Paralympic and Olympic athletes. They are role models and an inspiration to our young people. I also know, though, that each one of them will have been supported by an encouraging grassroots club or organisation. Without such clubs, accessible playing grounds and courts, and referees and coaches who encourage grassroots players to become professional athletes, we would not have the incredible set of athletes of whom the country is so proud. For that reason, I congratulate everyone who contributed to the success of our Paralympic and Olympic teams—the athletes, coaches, friends, families and officials.

Sport has incredible potential to open new doors for young people and break down barriers to opportunity. Every child should have the chance to find a sport that they enjoy, to thrive and grow in confidence, and to learn valuable teamworking skills. It is essential that sport forms a key part of a broad curriculum. Since 2011, the Youth Sport Trust has found that the number of hours of PE taught in secondary schools has fallen by 13%, but sport is not just important for young people and professional athletes; it is a way for adults to keep healthy, and to create friendships throughout their lives by watching and participating in it. That is why it is a massive concern that the latest Active Lives survey found that activity is less common in older people, women and those with a disability.

One third of adults in the UK do not meet the chief medical officer's minimum requirements for physical activity levels. Almost a third of our children and young people are considered inactive, meaning that 2.3 million children and young people do less than 30 minutes of activity each week. Sport England has found that children and young people from the least affluent families remain the least active, and are falling further and further behind. Sport is a form of social mobility. It allows young people to build teamworking skills and relationships with people from all walks of life. The Government must ensure that children are able to access sport on the curriculum and in their local communities. That means investment in our local sports facilities, more lighting for outdoor facilities, and the renovation of old leisure centres such as the one in Atherstone in my constituency. I was delighted a couple of weeks ago to put spades in the ground for the new physical activity hub in Bedworth.

In my experience as a player of county-level tennis, I have seen how the LTA has ensured that a variety of tennis options are available for people of all abilities. That includes wheelchair tennis, tennis for those with learning disabilities and visually impaired and deaf people, and para-standing and walking tennis. Those modifications demonstrate how every sport can become more inclusive, so long as we encourage organisations to have inclusivity as their priority. As a line judge and umpire at grassroots level and at Wimbledon, I know all too well that we need committed volunteers at every level of sport, from our junior and local events through to the highest level of sport at international events. There has been a pathway of training and support for those giving up their time, and it is essential that we continue that. Yesterday was a sad day—to find out that line judges at Wimbledon were being replaced by machines. Hopefully my role in this House will not meet the same end.

2.27 pm

**Jo Platt** (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor), who I know will be a great champion for inclusive and community sports. As a retread, this is not my maiden speech, but it is my first opportunity to address the Chamber in a debate since 2019. My time away from this House allowed me to engage deeply with the local community, listening and understanding the concerns, hope and resilience of constituents. I am therefore utterly delighted and profoundly grateful to the wonderful people of Leigh, Atherton, Tyldesley, Lowton, Golborne and parts of Astley for entrusting me with the chance to serve them once again.

I rise to speak in today's debate to highlight the positives that our constituency brings, especially in the realm of diversity in sport. Leigh and Atherton is a proud sporting town. Our beloved rugby league team, the Leigh Leopards, continue to inspire. While we faced a tough match against our main rivals, the Wigan Warriors, last Saturday—I reluctantly extend my congratulations to the Secretary of State, who is no longer in her place, on her team's victory—let us not overlook the importance of sportsmanship and community pride that both borough teams embody. It is not just the big teams that we honour; our constituency is rich with inclusive grassroots sports, which form the bedrock of our sporting culture. From rugby league and union to football, cricket and even a very successful girls water polo club in Tyldesley, the diversity of our clubs ensures that there is something for everyone. Each club, regardless of size, plays a vital role in fostering talent and building community connections. We have Tom Aspinall, from Atherton, an Ultimate Fighting Championship heavyweight champion, and the wonderful Ella Toone, from Tyldesley, our female superstar lioness, whose legacy continues to inspire the next generation of women football players.

I must also mention Leigh boxing club, a humble facility that has become one of the most decorated clubs in the country, producing champion after champion. One stand-out fighter, Paddy Hewitt, had the honour of supporting the Olympic boxing team in Paris in July. On a recent visit to the club, I was extremely encouraged to hear all the young boxers, male and female, express their wish to compete at the next Olympics.

Last but not least, we have our very own Olympic gold medallist, Keely Hodgkinson, who achieved a remarkable gold medal in the 800 metres event. I am sure that when she took to the track, this House and the whole country held their breath, knowing that we were witnessing a defining moment. Keely's journey is awe-inspiring. Her incredible talent and aspiration were supported by her club, Leigh Harriers—a club that has been in existence since 1909 and forms part of the heritage of Leigh, and of which I am extremely proud.

But this debate is about celebrating not just our Olympic champions but our Paralympic superstars. I want to give a very special mention to Gregg Warburton from Leigh, who did Leigh, Atherton and our country proud with his exceptional performance in wheelchair basketball at the Paris 2024 games. Gregg's journey is inspirational to watch; he showcases the importance of inclusivity in sport and emboldens the next generation of Paralympic athletes.

[Jo Platt]

It is often joked that there must be something in the water in such a small constituency to have produced so many fantastic athletes, but I believe that there is something even bigger at play: the steadfast support of the community leaders who run our clubs, and the passion and commitment of the coaches, volunteers and supporters, which create an environment where young athletes from all backgrounds can thrive. Our schools also play a significant role in this success, and I highlight in particular Fred Longworth high school, where both Ella Toone and Keely Hodgkinson studied.

We admire Keely, Gregg, Paddy and all our athletes, but we are equally proud of all the young people who contribute to the rich sporting culture that exists in our towns. Their hard work, dedication and spirit exemplify the best of our community. I am pleased to support a Government that are dedicated to developing the inclusivity of the creative industries. I am sure that the Minister agrees that it is crucial that we have the same focus on the sports sector, so that we create an equal access guarantee for all sports in schools and community groups, and ensure that everyone has the opportunity to pursue their dreams.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I call Steve Yemm to make his maiden speech.

2.33 pm

**Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab):** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) on his inspiring speech; I feel that I know his constituency a little better now. I commend all those who have delivered their maiden speeches today and in recent weeks.

It is a huge honour to stand before Members today as the newly elected Member of Parliament for Mansfield, which is the place of my birth. It is truly an honour for me to make my maiden speech in a debate on sport and ParalympicsGB. I am proud to have been elected with this new Labour Government—a Government committed to opportunity for all.

I pay tribute to my immediate predecessor, Ben Bradley, who was the Member of Parliament for Mansfield for seven years. I have always found Councillor Bradley to be extremely cordial and hard-working. He was both my MP and my local councillor, and I must pay tribute to his work ethic and dedication. I also pay tribute to the service of a further three predecessors, all of whom I have known personally. First, Sir Alan Meale, who was the Member of Parliament for Mansfield for 30 years, won six general elections and served from 1987 to 2017. Secondly, Don Concannon was the MP between 1966 and 1987, and introduced me and my wonderful wife Julia to the Labour party in Mansfield as teenagers.

Finally, Bernard Taylor—Lord Taylor—was the MP for Mansfield from 1941 to 1966, and was made a life peer in 1966. I enjoyed many a cup of tea and conversation in the other place with him. Lord Taylor served the people of Mansfield in one distinguished capacity or another for 50 years. Like me, Bernard was from a Mansfield mining family. He was a trade unionist who was locked out of Sherwood pit after the 1926 strike, and a committed Bevanite. What better role model could a new MP for Mansfield have than Bernard Taylor?

I am the first MP for Mansfield to be born in the constituency and elected as a new Member since Bernard Taylor in 1941, and indeed my family has a great deal in common with Bernard. In 1926, my grandfather was locked out of the Cwmtillery colliery, in the south Wales coalfield, and had to walk for 10 days from south Wales to Nottinghamshire with his wife and young son in search of work, settling first in Kirkby-in-Ashfield and then in Blidworth. He worked with his three sons, including my father, as coalface workers at the Blidworth colliery.

I was born in Rainworth, a pit village to the east of Mansfield, and attended the local village school, Heathlands primary. I launched my election campaign in June by giving a TV interview at the school gates. During the election campaign, I knocked on the door of the house where I was born, in Southwell Road East, Rainworth, and also the house where my mother was born, on Burns Street in central Mansfield. I am pleased to tell the House that they were both Labour households. I am so proud of the positive campaign that we ran in Mansfield; we completely and unashamedly focused on the need for opportunity and real change. I put on the record my thanks to the many people who helped over many years to get me here.

I bring to Parliament 30 years of international private sector business experience as a senior commercial leader and general manager in life sciences and technology, including as a chief executive officer of a US corporation and managing director of an Israel-based technology company. For the past five years, this has been with a focus on the application of machine learning and artificial intelligence to life sciences, drug discovery and genomics. I began my career as a medicinal chemist in the pharmaceutical industry, which I joined after leaving the Brunts school in Mansfield.

Mansfield has always been my family home. I grew up there at a time when the local economy was dominated by coalmining, engineering and textiles. Now it is home to successful and modern international businesses, including Linney, Power Saving Solutions, and Integrated Doorset Solutions, to name just a few.

Mansfield is a compact constituency with diverse neighbourhoods such as Mansfield Woodhouse, Forest Town, Rainworth, Ladybrook, Oak Tree and Warsop, and they are all special and unique. Our football club, Mansfield Town, is based in the oldest ground in the football league, dating right back to 1861. Given the topic of this debate, I congratulate and pay tribute to Charlotte Henshaw, a local Paralympian and gold medallist in both swimming and canoeing, and to Sam and Ollie Hynd, medal-winning Paralympian swimmers—all good friends hailing from Mansfield, and local heroes for all of us.

Our local hospital, King's Mill, is where my wife Julia is employed as a consultant radiographer, and where all our children and grandchildren were born. Julia has worked in the NHS for over 37 years. My priorities in this place will of course be aligned with my background in science and technology, but, more importantly, they will always be informed by my own journey—from a pit village to becoming a scientist and business leader, and then to Westminster—and will focus on ensuring that every boy and girl in my constituency and our country knows that they have a life of great opportunity within their grasp.



I am proud to be here representing such a fantastic constituency. As Betty Boothroyd, a former Speaker of this House, said:

“It’s like miners’ coal dust underneath your fingernails. Very difficult to scrub out. I’m a social democrat to my fingertips.”

This is, for me, truly the opportunity of a lifetime, so once again I say, “Thank you so much” to the people of Mansfield for putting their faith in me. I will not let them down.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I do not want to put anybody on a time limit, so I will prioritise maiden speeches. Those who are not seeking to make maiden speeches might reflect on that for a short while. I call Chris Bloore to make his maiden speech.

2.42 pm

**Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab):** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I pay tribute to those who have made their maiden speeches today. I have learned a lot—especially that we may have some excellent tennis doubles partnerships on the Labour Benches.

It is an enormous privilege to give my maiden speech in this debate as the representative for Redditch and the villages. During the summer, it was impossible not to be fixated and enthralled by the incredible achievements of our Olympic and Paralympic athletes. To paraphrase Lord Coe, sport can unify us, and I know that this Government believe that sport can be an essential tool in improving our nation’s health and in opening new doors and breaking down barriers to opportunity for young people.

I must admit to having delayed my maiden speech. The incredible contributions by those from all sides of the House left me with much to ponder. I reached out to older—I mean more experienced—colleagues about what the blueprint for a maiden speech should look like. The advice was: “Don’t try to be funny; jokes won’t work. But don’t be too serious or plagiarise “The West Wing”. Be self-deprecating, but don’t write your opponent’s attack lines for them. Keep it short but not too short, and whatever you do, don’t go on for too long.” With that clear advice in mind, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall try to make some progress.

Politics can be bruising, but I want to pay tribute to my immediate predecessor, Rachel Maclean. We did not often agree, but there can be no doubting her passion and dedication to our community. I also pay tribute to her caseworker team for their support in the handover period. Sadly, Karen Lumley, our Member of Parliament from 2010 to 2017, passed away last year aged just 59. Karen was a larger-than-life character who campaigned passionately on education and was greatly appreciated by her constituents. I thank her for her service and send my best wishes to her husband Richard.

Finally, I pay tribute to Baroness Jacqui Smith of Malvern. Jacqui was the Member of Parliament for our community for 13 years, and gave me my first experience of frontline politics, when I knocked on doors in Church Hill for her re-election in 2001. Appointed the first female Home Secretary, she was a trailblazer, and, as fate would have it, she was knocking on doors with me at 10 minutes to 10 in the very same part of town on the day of my election. Although I remain sad that her

partnership with Iain Dale on the “For the Many” pod has been broken, higher education and the Government are stronger for her return.

It is customary to give a whistle-stop tour of one’s constituency at this point. I am sure many Members will know that Redditch is most famous for being a new town designated in 1964. Redditch was built as a bold flagship new town, utilising new planning methods. Thousands of houses were built, the population more than doubled, and our dual carriageways and roundabouts remain the envy of many town planners.

Redditch has been, and continues to be, the home of world-leading businesses. My first trip as a primary school child was to the historic Forge Mill needle museum, where I learned that Redditch was once responsible for making 90% of the world’s needles. Redditch is also the official home of Royal Enfield, and the Bullet motorcycle was made in the factory on Hewell Road, which was the town’s biggest employer from the 1900s until the 1960s. Today, exceptional firms such as Bee Lighting deliver cutting-edge technology to some of the world’s largest car manufacturers.

Redditch is an eclectic mix of urban and rural, with a vibrant urban centre and the beautiful Arrow Valley park, as well as Roundhill wood in the south of the constituency, which was the inspiration for the shire in Tolkien’s “The Lord of the Rings”. However, Redditch also has a rich cultural heritage. The late great John Bonham, drummer for Led Zeppelin, was born in Redditch. Our beautiful Palace theatre brings us enjoyment and laughter. Reimagine Redditch is bringing creativity to our communities, and Radio 4’s “The Archers” is said to be based on landmarks in Hanbury and Inkberrow. Also, Harry Styles was born in Redditch, so today I am claiming him as our own.

In truth, my constituency is defined by our people—people who are shaping and defining our future. Before the recess, I spoke in this House to commend the work of local anti-knife crime campaigner Pete Martin, who has dedicated his life to educating young people about the dangers of knife crime in order to make our young people and our streets safer. Lee McKenzie is the chief executive officer of the Sandycroft Centre, an award-winning community hub that offers domestic abuse and mental health support, and supports some of the most at-risk people in our communities. She has undoubtedly saved many lives.

Matt Ball arrived as the new headteacher at Ridgeway school facing challenging circumstances. Still, his staff delivered some of the most impressive and improved results nationwide over the summer. I think of Jo Bussey, the organiser of the Redditch carnival; the Batchley support group; Karen from Inspire Services; the Royal British Legion fundraisers Gethin Jones and Gerry Marsden; the disability support group; the Church Hill big local partnership, the staff and governors of Your Ideas, and many more. They are the best of our community, and we cherish their work.

However, in my constituency, we face many deep-seated challenges. I mentioned Harry Styles, and the Alexandra hospital, where he was born, has since lost its maternity services. Local parents are forced to travel to Worcester or Birmingham to give birth. During the election, when my son was struggling to breathe, I could not take him to the Alex because the paediatric services have also been lost. North Worcestershire needs more than one

[Chris Bloore]

hospital to provide those critical services, and I make no apologies for my inevitably repetitive interventions on that in future. A decade ago, I stood for weeks outside supermarkets and on high streets collecting signatures against the loss of those services. Now, I will use this platform to restart the debate on health services for our community.

In my constituency, too many children with SEND requirements are going without the necessary provision that they deserve. Families are left in desperate states as they fight for the provision their children need. I have never felt more admiration, or anger, than when listening to parents such as Tracy Winchester and Karen Nokes, who are forced to fight so hard for so many children. Backlogs should not stop children having the opportunity to thrive in an education setting, and parents should not be pulled out of the workforce to ensure that that happens. We cannot leave this Parliament until the dreams and aspirations of those children are rekindled and family life rebuilt. As we once built a national health service in this country, we must again reaffirm our belief in cradle-to-grave healthcare by delivering a national care service that brings dignity to all. Those are big challenges, but the electorate sent us here to deliver them.

I may have the honour of sitting in this place, and I cannot repeat enough my gratitude to the voters who put their trust in me, but elections are not won by individuals: they are won by teams. After I horrifically failed to mention so many names during my victory speech in Redditch, I am afraid I am going to list many of them now: my victory was due to the dedication of Sharon, Mark, Joe, Bill, Andy, Monica, Juliet, David, Ian, Juma, Jamie, Jack, Rebecca, Hannah, Graham, Will, Sachin, Gary, Jane, Robin, Karen, Joanna, Gilly, James and Jack Fardoe, Carl, Rita, Jen, Phil, Andrea, and many others. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] They will love that. Those people worked so selflessly because they believed that Redditch deserved better.

My politics comes from my parents. My mother Marion dedicated her entire working life to the NHS as an occupational therapist, rising from a poor working-class family to become a lecturer in her profession. I saw what happened to the NHS in the 1980s and the impact it had on her and her colleagues. My dad Mike worked for the BBC, and was awarded a BAFTA in 1983 for editing "Boys from the Blackstuff", a gritty representation of the impacts of the Thatcher Government. Incidentally, that was also the year I was born, although I have never asked my father what his highlight of 1983 was.

My parents taught me that their achievements were built on the support and encouragement of others. They also taught me that we have a responsibility to ensure that the same chances are available to everyone in society, that everyone has the right to live their dreams and fulfil their potential if they work hard, and that there is such a thing as society. It is now common for politics and political institutions to be routinely devalued. Many of those we represent feel that nothing can or will ever change for the better, but I retain the sense of optimism and belief that tomorrow can be better than today, and that the best days for my constituents lie ahead of us, if only we have the courage and vision to fight for them.

Finally, I thank my beautiful little boy for understanding why Daddy has to go on the train every Monday and disappear when he should really be playing with Hot Wheels. To return to the theme of this debate, my time in this place might be short, but I fully intend to leave everything out on the field.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I call Michael Wheeler to make his maiden speech.

2.51 pm

**Michael Wheeler** (Worsley and Eccles) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Part of me was worried that I might never be called to make my maiden speech in this Chamber, following my assertion to Mr Speaker that Eccles cakes were far superior to Chorley cakes. However, it is my sincerest hope that our mutual appreciation of Vimto will bridge any divide that exists. I am pleased to be following an excellent and educational maiden speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore). I think he will find that some of the rules he was given for his maiden speech might be reflected in mine.

I must start by recording my thanks to my predecessor, Baroness Keeley of Worsley. Barbara served the people of Worsley and Eccles South and, before that, Worsley with commitment and in the true spirit of public service. She was never afraid to stand by those who put her in this place, an example that I intend to follow. I am sure she will be remembered for her steadfast and tenacious support for carers and their rights, work that I have no doubt she will continue in the other place.

I also pay tribute to my family: their contribution to my work in this House for my constituents might go unnoticed by the wider world, but it will never go unappreciated by me. Any success I achieve is because I am the man my mum and dad made, and because of the foundation of love my wife and son give me every single day.

I now turn to my constituency of Worsley and Eccles, a community that I am genuinely fortunate to represent. While it forms part of the wider urban area of Greater Manchester, the towns that make it up have proud histories all of their own. The industrial heritage of Worsley and Barton is on clear display to all who visit in the shape of our mills and canals, one of which is famously orange—when I was a child, I was convinced it was filled with Irn-Bru. Eccles gave the world the aforementioned Eccles cake, as well as the Eccles protector lamp, a proud symbol of our mining past that saved countless lives down in the dark on the coalface. Astley is home to the Lancashire Mining Museum, which houses the largest surviving functional winding engine in the world, and is entirely run by fantastic volunteers who make a mean cup of tea on top of everything else.

Irlam and Cadishead lie between the banks of the Manchester ship canal and our beautiful and precious mossland, bringing together the urban and rural—the industrial and agricultural—in a way that must be preserved and protected. Boothstown and Ellenbrook are home to the Royal Agricultural Society's fifth garden, RHS Bridgewater, which is well worth a visit for anyone passing our way, and Swinton is the home of L. S. Lowry, who as an artist did so much to illustrate the lives of ordinary working people.

But while a community might be shaped by its place, it is formed of its people, and I truly represent the best: never afraid to tell you what they think, sometimes at length and sometimes at loud volumes, but often with a “thanks for listening” at the end of it all. More than anything, it is the generosity of spirit so often on display that sets me back and gives me pause for thought. I have been fortunate enough to meet and speak with so many people who give so much of themselves and their time for the benefit of others. They include the inspirational volunteers working on the Salford Families in Need Meals Project, who take the time to not only source, pack and distribute food, but provide recipes for families to go with it; Val and her team, who run a support group for their peers suffering from fibromyalgia; Anna Barrow and her husband Martyn, who have spoken out about the life-changing effect that motor neurone disease has had on her life, and whose indomitable spirit and humour will forever leave a mark on me; Barbara, who organises a supper club with bingo and a quiz for older residents and carers on her estate, from which I have been retired as the worst bingo caller in the world; the young people of Salford Youth Services Nerd Club, who happily accepted me as one of their own; and all those involved in grassroots sport right across my community. From Eccles rugby football club to Winton Wanderers and so many others, the good they do for our young people is immeasurable.

I am proud to call this community my home, and even prouder that its people have chosen me as their representative. I will always work to deliver for them and in their interests. However, should I fail in that duty, I hope it is a measure of reassurance for them to know that one among them will always be able to bring me to task: my mum. It is a particular kind of privilege and terror to have your own mum as your constituent.

Like a number of my hon. Friends, I have spent most of my working life fighting for working people as a trade unionist. I have worked for the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers trade union, campaigning on behalf of some of the lowest paid and least secure in our economy, and that experience has left an indelible mark on me. I have come to this place excited to be part of the change that those workers and my constituents voted for at the election—change that will deliver much-needed improvements to their lives, whether that is the new deal for working people that has been published today, making work pay and promoting work-life balance; real support for parents and children through action to provide available, affordable and accessible childcare; or the plan to support our communities and high streets, tackling antisocial behaviour and making us all feel safer at home. All those measures will improve lives and, when taken together and alongside everything else this new Labour Government will do, will be transformative for working people and our local communities.

Let me finish by saying that life is too short, and the scale of work we do as Members of the place is too big, to waste time on pettiness or games. I am a straightforward person and have even been described as “friendly”. I look forward to working with everyone in this House in the interests of our respective constituents and our shared country. I aim to be as generous as a properly filled Eccles cakes, as reassuring as the light of a protector lamp down in the dark, and as warm, forthright and straight-speaking as the people of my constituency.

In the spirit of co-operation, for the good of us all and the work we do for those we represent, let me share with all hon. Members some advice my dad gave me: there is never any shame in learning from others; never cross a picket line; and, most importantly, always get your round in.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I call Lee Barron to make his maiden speech.

2.59 pm

**Lee Barron** (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

It is great to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles (Michael Wheeler). I congratulate everybody who has done their maiden speeches today, and this is the first time I have done it—I suppose that is why they are called maiden speeches. I am proud to speak here for the first time, especially in this debate, as facilities in Corby were used by athletes to train for the Olympics. Kieran Reilly, who lives in Corby, won silver at the BMX freestyle. Adrenaline Alley was the venue he used in the constituency, a terrific venue that many use.

I am delighted to be the Member of Parliament for the constituency of Corby and East Northamptonshire. I pay tribute to my predecessor, Tom Pursglove, who had the honour to represent Corby for nine years and became a Minister during that time. I know for a fact that he was very proud to serve his constituency, and I always found him extremely constructive and extremely cordial. I know that now, after Parliament, he is looking at doing work with disabled people and getting disabled people better access to work. I hope that I will be able to work with him, because I am now chairing an all-party parliamentary group on modernising employment. One area we are going to look at is how disabled people can access work, so I hope our paths will cross again.

I also thank Andy Sawford, the last Labour Member of Parliament for the constituency, who continues to be a good friend to our constituency. He is somebody I seek wise counsel from, and I am fortunate enough to say that I get that rather cheaply. He runs a political consultancy, so if hon. Members ever ask him for his opinion, it is going to cost them a lot of money, but whenever I do, I get it for free. Thanks, Andy, for being there for us as we move on.

Corby and East Northamptonshire is a large constituency that I have had many years of dealing with. I represented Corby's postal workers for over a decade, and I can tell you now that a finer group of workers you will never be able to meet. My daughter Hannah was married at the wonderful venue at the Stanwick hotel, and my father was for a time a boot and shoe worker in the town of Raunds. Indeed, Raunds has its place in history for fighting for fair wages and good pay. Next year marks the 120th anniversary of the Raunds strike of 1905, which saw workers who made boots for the Army march to Parliament to demand better pay. The War Office agreed and set a minimum rate for their job. The case for fair wages and good pay is as relevant today as it was then.

Work should be the route out of poverty. It should not mean a lifetime trapped in it, yet 40% of children living in Corby and East Northamptonshire who live in poverty have at least one working parent. We need to



[Lee Barron]

reshape the world of work so that it pays, and our economy so that the dignity of a job is always better than no job. In-work poverty should be eradicated and chucked into the dustbin of history. Today, we celebrate the new deal for working people being laid before this House. With that, we will have the foundations for a better future for working people. I want to be around to ensure we can do that.

Other parts that make up my constituency include the market town of Thrapston, which boasts its own livestock market. I was delighted to join Thrapston's mayor, Andy McGovern, at his recent service to celebrate his term of office. East Northamptonshire is also home to the town of Oundle. Oundle school and Prince William school are two of three schools in an open education partnership, which I am delighted to be able to support and facilitate, which sees independent and state schools coming together to share their facilities and best practices.

Corby is a town built on steel. Back in the day, many travelled down from Scotland as steelworkers, and the steelworks were built. Residents are rightly proud of their heritage, which they celebrate each year with a weekend of highland games and many Burns suppers. It has a proud history and a spirit that has seen residents rise against any adversity they have faced. That is why after fighting against the steelworks closure in the 1980s, which saw over 10,000 people thrown on the dole, they rebuilt their town; they rebuilt their communities, and they would not be beaten.

During my time on the campaign trail, one lady whose door I knocked on captured that spirit. "I'm standing to be your Member of Parliament at the next election," I said. "That's amazing. My mum would really love to meet you; can you come back in half an hour because we've got guests at the minute?" I said yes, so I went back. It turned out her mum had just stopped taking treatment for stage 4 cancer and wanted to live her days. She said to me, "I want you to do two things. First, always speak up for Corby; we're good people, we're proud people. The second thing I want you to do is get the No. 50 bus back." I said, "Okay, what's the No. 50 bus?" The No. 50 bus is the direct bus that went from Corby to Kettering general hospital. "When my husband was in hospital, that was my lifeline to get to see him and I want it back," she said. I am going to pop round to see her daughter because on 2 November, it is back; it will take people directly from Corby to Kettering general. The only thing they cannot do is give us the No. 50 back; it is now the No. 2 because the No. 50 goes to Peterborough and apparently it will cost money to get the number back, but I think the principle has been established.

I have spent my adult life representing working people, from the start when I took on an apprenticeship with the Royal Mail and I joined my union, the Communication Workers Union. A lot of people talk about their schooling, their university, their training. The CWU was my schooling, my university, my training, and without a shadow of a doubt I would not be here today if it was not for the CWU.

The journey here has been somewhat interesting to say the least. It started in the back of a taxi with me and Frances O'Grady talking about the importance of working-class

people entering our politics, because we were on our way to the funeral of Jack Dromey, a dear friend to this place, this party and our movement. I want to put on record my thanks to the TUC for what it did in supporting me during my time as the candidate. It went from the back of a taxi with Frances to driving around Corby in a Vauxhall with Eamonn Norton and Mark Pengelly knocking on the doors of about 600 Labour party members to try to convince them I was the candidate they should all vote for. We did the best we could; I became the candidate and now I represent that constituency.

I know it is not going to be easy, but I am determined to make a difference. There are issues that I want to get involved with and changes I want to see. I want to see a difference in the world of work by making sure that work really does pay and is a route out of poverty. I want to make a difference to give a voice to so many families with children with special educational needs who are being denied the basic right to education; every child has the right to education, and having special educational needs should not mean that they are denied that fundamental right.

The House is going to discuss dignity in dying, but there is another aspect to it that I want to talk about. In this country, it is legal to sack a worker on the grounds of capability when they have a terminal diagnosis. That is fundamentally wrong; we need to close that loophole and make sure that the last thing people worry about when they have such a diagnosis is the future of their job. We should not be treating people like that and we need to make the changes accordingly.

Lastly, I want to thank my family for their support. I am a proud father, grandfather, son and brother to a family that has always been strong in values and principles and I thank them all. My mum could not be part of this journey here with me because she died several years ago, but I want to say her name, Patricia Eileen Lilian Barron, because now I have said her name they will write it down; it will be in *Hansard* so no one can erase it and a bit of her will live forever, and I am proud to be able to do that.

There is much to do to make the change that we need to give people back a future that they can once again look forward to. I for one will do all I can to make it happen. Our unity is our strength, our solidarity; that is how we will get there and I intend to make the most of the time I have in this place.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I call Joani Reid to make her maiden speech.

3.9 pm

**Joani Reid** (East Kilbride and Strathaven) (Lab): I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to deliver my maiden speech. I begin by congratulating my hon. Friends the Members for Corby and East Northamptonshire (Lee Barron), for Worsley and Eccles (Michael Wheeler) and for Redditch (Chris Bloore), all of whom spoke with such passion and commitment about their constituencies. I hope that the people of Corby have many happy celebrations on 2 November when the No. 2/50 bus comes back into service.

It truly is an honour to serve the people of East Kilbride and Strathaven. None of us is in this House by right. We propose ourselves, but it is the voters who

dispose. The people are the masters of our fate, and all of us have a duty of trust and a responsibility to work hard, and I am determined to repay the trust placed in me by representing my constituents to the very best of my ability. In that spirit, I pay tribute to my predecessor Dr Lisa Cameron. Building on her long-standing career as an NHS psychologist, she did much good work in this place to improve the lives of her constituents. I wish to also pay tribute to the hard work and dedication of my two Labour predecessors: Michael McCann and in particular Adam Ingram, who served my constituency for 23 years.

I have been fortunate enough to have had many sources of inspiration and support throughout my career, the very first of whom was the late, great Tessa Jowell. Without her political tenacity, vision and ability to bring people together, we would never have delivered the 2012 Olympic games, which was the greatest sporting event this country had seen in a generation. Tessa recognised the power that sport can have in inspiring and uniting people, communities and countries.

My constituency is home to a thriving sporting sector, both professional and grassroots, including Scotland's only professional basketball team, the Caledonian Gladiators and, my personal favourite, the Claremont Colts, a disability football team for young adults which provides dignity, a sense of belonging and good old-fashioned fun. The unprecedented growth of women's football has brought me great delight in recent years, but surely the catalyst for that was "Gregory's Girl", a trailblazing film about women's football, which starred the East Kilbride born-and-bred actress Dee Hepburn.

East Kilbride is believed to take its name from a woman: the patron saint of Ireland, Brigid of Kildare, who is believed to have performed healing miracles. There is nothing to suggest that Brigid ever visited Scotland, but in East Kilbride, we can say that she visited us, and we have paid her a pretty good tribute through the town we have built. East Kilbride is Scotland's first new town built in the post-war era to accommodate the overspill from Glasgow, offering an escape from dire overcrowding and squalid conditions in Glasgow's infamous tenements.

East Kilbride quickly became a symbol of progress and a place where working families could find not just homes, but communities, opportunity and a future. Its modern architecture, parks and green spaces have made it a model of post-war urban planning. East Kilbride may have delivered a new start for many Glaswegians, but folk there did not leave behind the city's famous humanity and defiance of injustice when they quit those tenements. One of the most powerful statements of solidarity that this country has ever seen was made by a group of engineers from East Kilbride's Rolls-Royce factory. Ordinary people risked their livelihoods to defy the Chilean dictatorship in 1974 by refusing to repair the engines that had been used to destroy the country's democratic Government. There was no violence, no hatred; just the power of working people standing together. Only a few weeks ago, one of the engineers who led that action, Bob Fulton, died at the age of 101, and I take this opportunity to pay tribute to him and his legacy, which will live on. Strathaven was also home to another Scottish revolutionary: James "Purlic" Wilson, who was a prominent figure in the radical movement seeking electoral reform.

Although East Kilbride is home to 80% of my constituents, it only accounts for 20% of its land mass. The rural communities of Stonehouse, Glassford, Chapelton, Sandford and Auldhouse all have distinctive features and a unique community spirit.

Strathaven, with its historic market town charm, offers a different yet equally essential contribution to the character of my constituency. If Kilbride is a name with Gaelic origins, Strathaven is even older, with Brythonic roots. Today, it exemplifies the deep-rooted sense of shared history that goes through my constituency and Scotland as a whole. It reminds us that we must do all that we can to support our rural communities to overcome the many challenges they also face.

During the election campaign, when I was out knocking doors on the doorsteps of East Kilbride and Strathaven, nobody ever asked me for a miracle that only St Brigid could deliver. It is not miracles that people seek; it is just the basics: public services that work, jobs that pay, a safe and warm home, and maybe even just enough cash at the end of the week to get a takeaway. Those conversations have stayed with me since and will continue to be at the forefront of my mind while I serve in this place.

Other things struck me and were emphasised by the civil disorder that we saw over the summer. We share serious concerns across the House about the rise of hate, whether that be antisemitism, Islamophobia or misogyny, which has infected far too much of our public discourse in recent years, particularly on social media. I intend to dedicate much of my time here to working cross-party to address the alarming upsurge in racism and bigotry online, particularly in my work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group against antisemitism. Inspired by the Rolls-Royce workers decades ago, we can come together and say, "Nae pasaran"—they shall not pass.

To push back and defeat hate, we must have hope, but that hope must be real and based on realism rather than idealism or indeed miracles. There is no contradiction between a politics that is realistic and a politics that is hopeful. Indeed, we have all had enough—too much—false hope in the last few years.

I believe in what the Australian leader Ben Chifley called the shining city on a hill, but I also believe that we need a clear plan for how to get there and to be honest about how long it might take. Responsible and effective government does not undermine real hope in our communities; it underpins it. So, to the people and the communities of East Kilbride and Strathaven, I say thank you once again for placing your hope and trust in me.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I call Danny Beales to make his maiden speech.

3.17 pm

**Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab):** It is a privilege to follow such wonderful speeches from right across the House, and particularly from my hon. Friends the Members for Corby and East Northamptonshire (Lee Barron) and for East Kilbride and Strathaven (Joani Reid). I thought that Uxbridge and South Ruislip was a tongue-twister, but I might have been slightly outdone by my hon. Friends.

[*Danny Beales*]

I want to say thank you to the people of Uxbridge and South Ruislip for their perseverance. They have waited even longer for a Labour MP than I have waited to make my maiden speech. I remember meeting one gentleman who told me that he returned from war and voted for the first time on the Navy ship back to South Ruislip in 1945. He had voted Labour then for the first time and at every single election since. While he was delighted to see the 1945 Labour Government returned and the great things that they did, unfortunately he never subsequently saw a Labour MP in South Ruislip until today.

It is always a privilege and an honour to represent the communities that we are born in, we grew up in and we live in, and perhaps even more so when it initially seems like it might not happen. As I am sure colleagues know, six weeks feels like a long campaign. Well, trust me: two and a half years of campaigning feels like a lifetime, but it did give me the opportunity to speak to thousands of my constituents in every corner of my constituency.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Steve Tuckwell, who worked incredibly hard in the 10 months that he was our Member of Parliament. In the spirit of focusing on what unites us, I have to say that Steve and I have more in common than people might initially imagine. We were both born in Hillingdon hospital and we attended local schools. We even lived on the same street in South Ruislip—the street that my grandparents called home for many years. One of the first questions I am often asked is whether I share his love of fish and chips and will continue his infamous campaign for a new chippy in Uxbridge. Well, I must admit that that is one thing on which we differ slightly. I defer to him and his leadership of the fish and chip shop campaign.

Although that campaign certainly created a few headlines, Uxbridge and South Ruislip is no stranger to news headlines. Arguably, it is one of the most canvassed and media-interviewed constituencies in the country. At points, it has been hard for my constituents to walk down Uxbridge High Street without a journalist asking for their opinions about a former Prime Minister or the latest UK political drama. I am hoping that the next four years will be just as busy, but slightly less dramatic for my constituents than the previous four years. Although we do not share the same party affiliation, it must be said that Lord Randall of Uxbridge left big shoes to fill as a constituency MP, and I hope that I can replicate his reputation for being a hard-working and dedicated constituency MP.

Uxbridge and South Ruislip is not defined by any one issue or any one former political representative; it is defined instead by its rich heritage, its hard-working and aspirational communities, and its potential. It is a diverse place. Indeed, the contributions of its diverse communities are nothing new. Growing up, I remember the Polish war memorial standing in South Ruislip—a testament to the contribution that people coming to our country have made throughout our history and continue to make today. The memorial commemorates just some of the many service personnel who joined the UK war effort to fight fascism and to defend the values of democracy and liberalism. Over the summer, we have been reminded again that those values can never be taken for granted.

Today, my constituency remains home to many members of our amazing armed forces. RAF Northolt has a long and proud history of being the heart of the Royal Air Force, and our service personnel are among the very best of us. I have met far too many service families who have been let down and left without the right support or decent housing, and I want to be an MP who will champion them and their families. I look forward to learning more about the RAF in the parliamentary armed forces scheme this year.

Uxbridge and South Ruislip is also a place of innovation, of enterprise. It is home to wonderful schools, Uxbridge College, which has a new collaboration with Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Brunel University. It is home to businesses big and small, and I am committed to working with them to ensure their opportunities to grow and the potential for good local jobs are realised.

Uxbridge and South Ruislip is also a place powered by the hard work of volunteers—groups I have met such as the Salvation Army, the Harefield Community Centre, ShopMobility and the Hillingdon Litter Pickers. I could go on. Many groups I have met, however, have struggled in recent years with local government cuts that have come to bite, and I hope to do all I can to support and to champion them in the years ahead.

As we debate the value of UK sport on the international stage and the amazing achievements of our Paralympians, such as Natasha Baker, the multiple-medal-winning dressage champion from Cowley, and Michael Sharkey from Hillingdon, it is also important that we recognise that, although Uxbridge is not home to the biggest sporting clubs or the biggest stadiums, it is home to the very best of British grassroots sport, again powered by communities and by volunteers. We are the adopted home of Wealdstone football club, which, through member donations and fan power alone, has grown and shown the way for fan-led football across this country. I am determined to work with them to secure their future with a long-term and sustainable home.

As with many towns and cities across our great nation, the NHS is right at the heart of our community, with many heroic doctors, nurses and care workers from right across the globe. I am committed to pressing for the urgent investment in healthcare that we need, as well as a new Hillingdon hospital, which is desperately, desperately needed.

Our area is rich in nature, with beautiful lakes, canals, rivers and countryside. It is both the edge of the city and the gateway to the Colne valley. Having met representatives of the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust and the Colne Valley Regional Park, it is clear to me that we can and should do more to enhance our beautiful green spaces. I believe there is an opportunity to deliver the house building we desperately need and also ensure that the benefits are felt locally and that we enhance our nature-rich spaces.

It must be said, though, that despite being pleasant, green and welcoming, Hillingdon is also a place where life chances are not equal. Far too many people are struggling to make ends meet, and the public services they desperately need have been cut away. Like many colleagues in this House, far too many of the emails I receive are from parents struggling to get an education, health and care plan and the support they need for their children at school. There are section 21 evictions, extortionate leaseholder charges, damp, mould, disrepair, homelessness—on



and on it goes. For me, these stories are all too familiar. They were my childhood: experiencing homelessness twice; having the bailiffs knocking at the front door; the emergency credit running down on the meter. These experiences opened my eyes to the importance of politics—to the importance of this place.

Growing up, I was desperate to see change in my community and my country. It has never seemed fair to me that, working two jobs, my mum was still unable to pay our bills. I felt as strongly as I do today that, as other Members have said, hard work should always pay. Working hard should mean that people can afford a safe, dry and decent home, and every child should have the opportunity for a great education. These are the values that unite the vast majority of us in this country and in Uxbridge and South Ruislip: hard work, playing by the rules and equal opportunities to succeed.

Despite those struggles, I have always been hugely appreciative of everyone who has supported and encouraged me and made today possible. There are far too many people to mention individually—I will not do what my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) did and have a long list of people but forget some—but I thank my friends and family, in particular my mum, who is in the Gallery. She sacrificed so much to give me the chance to stand here today. I thank my former teachers, colleagues and councillors. My 10-year period in local government was an incredible opportunity and a privilege, allowing me to build the next generation of council homes, and to hand over keys to families and see their faces light up. During that time, it was clear to me that local action would never be enough. The challenges in the housing sector required national action. We need to deliver millions more homes across this country. I welcome this Government's commitment to do that, and to develop the homelessness strategy.

During my professional career in the health sector I worked to ensure that new diabetes technologies were available on the NHS, and to reduce new HIV transmissions. I have seen time and again the need to modernise and improve our health system so that it genuinely puts the needs of patient first, and promotes good health as much as it treats ill health. Those are the challenges I look forward to playing my part in tackling in the months and years ahead.

To finish as I started, the journey from homelessness to the House of Commons is one not too often made, but I want to do my bit so that every child in this country can follow in my footsteps, and no one is held back by the experience of homelessness in our country. I thank everyone who has supported me in some way. I thank the voters of Uxbridge and South Ruislip who have returned me as their first Labour MP. I want to reiterate to them that, in me, they have a local champion, a national voice, and someone working tirelessly for them to deliver our hospital, improve our schools and high streets and tackle our housing crisis, to ensure that we have even more to be proud of in Uxbridge and South Ruislip.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I call Tom Hayes to make his maiden speech.

3.27 pm

**Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab):** It is an honour to speak today as the first ever Labour MP for Bournemouth East, one of two Labour MPs for Bournemouth and

one of many first-time Labour MPs in coastal seats won for the first time, working with our first Labour Government for 14 years. I am delighted to follow such fantastic maiden speeches by so many hon. Friends and colleagues from all parties and parts of our country. Listening to the speeches, it is clear that we have an amazing country with so many brilliant places to live, visit and work. However, regrettably, lamentably and unhappily, I must disagree with some of the wonderful maiden speeches, because Bournemouth alone is truly the best place in our country.

On the point of this debate, we have an outstanding variety of sports teams, including a premier league team, the Cherries. Moreover, we have Queen's Park Ladies, who hit the headlines six months ago for winning a league dominated by boys' teams without losing a single match. Many will rightly know and love Bournemouth for our sunshine, sandy beaches and sparkling sea, but what truly makes Bournemouth so special is our fantastic people. I am honoured to have spoken with so many of them on their doorsteps, in their community halls and in my surgeries, to listen to their stories and their hopes and to be entrusted with all they want for the future. I share their hopes and I will work tirelessly to help turn them into reality.

Working together, I am convinced that there is nothing Bournemouth cannot do and will not achieve. We are already the home of world-leading film, TV, music and video effects. If hon. Members are "Bridgerton" fans—why would they not be?—they will be able to see scenes made in Bournemouth by our video effects companies. We are also the home of outstanding healthcare training, with the Health Sciences University, Bournemouth University and Bournemouth and Poole College educating the nurses and doctors of the future. Our local college is opening a second simulated hospital ward to train school leavers and adults for vital careers in the health and care sectors. Many will know Bournemouth for our hospitality and our education sectors, but we are also an important finance hub and home to growing life sciences, digital and green sectors. Indeed, our development of Bournemouth's ability to generate clean energy, store it and power so many of the things that we rely on is a passion of mine and many others in our town. Having spent 10 years in local government with a particular focus on driving forward decarbonisation, I bring strong experience of delivery and will fight to bring green investment to our town so that we thrive now and for decades to come.

The strength of our society is measured in its capacity to deal with shocks—we have seen plenty of those in recent years—but it is also measured in our ability to maintain our values. Caring equally for the health of all, regardless of income and background, is a fundamental expression of those values. When I was growing up in the late '80s and early '90s as a young carer to two disabled parents on low incomes, I learned that the first to suffer when our NHS is cut back are those with the greatest vulnerability and the smallest amount of money.

Equally, I saw that the people who flourish when the NHS is reformed and sustainably funded, as it was by the last Labour Government, are people like my parents. In good times and bad for our health service, I have seen what our NHS meant to my parents and the security it gave them, despite all the harsh blows that life dealt them. Healthcare is a marker of who we are, and I will

[Tom Hayes]

play my part in supporting my local community to receive the care they deserve. I will play my part in supporting our carers to receive the investment and backing they need.

I feel blessed by my upbringing in Salford. I know that life is more than a zero-sum game in which what you gain, I lose. When teachers stayed late after the school day to give me the education I needed, they did not see my gain as their loss. When nurses and doctors went so many extra miles to care for my family, they did not regard my family's gain as their loss. When family members and neighbours wrapped their arms around me and nourished and cared for me, they did not regard our gain as their loss. These kind, generous people gave so much of themselves because they wanted a young boy and his parents to have a better life. They believed, like me, that life is about enlarging the flourishing, the care and the love in our world, and that is why I am here in this place.

I have served as a councillor for 10 years, and as a domestic abuse and mental health charity chief executive for five years, and I am here today because I believe, like those who cared for me and those I learned from, that we must never lose hope and never lose sight of our ambition to make this country a fairer and more equal society. As William Blake wrote:

"Pity would be no more,

If we did not make somebody Poor".

Poverty is a systemic issue that needs big solutions: houses need building, healthcare needs re-establishing, education needs resurrecting. This is how we will make Bournemouth and Britain better and fairer. These are my values. These are the values of Bournemouth. Our town can and will do amazing things for the enduring benefit of generations to come, and I pledge to stand alongside my neighbours in making Bournemouth better.

I have been in this House for only a short time, but already it is abundantly clear to me that this Parliament is made up of people with overflowingly strong values. One such person who served in this place with such values is my predecessor, Tobias Ellwood. Tobias was committed to the defence of our realm in difficult and unpredictable times. He heroically tried to save the life of PC Keith Palmer in the terror attack on our Parliament. I pay tribute to PC Keith Palmer's heroism and to Tobias's service. I wish him well for the future.

We all take our approach to service differently. My own approach is best summed up by a song that my late father loved. I will not try to sing it, but the lyrics are these:

"We can work it out

We can work it out

Life is very short

And there's no time

For fussing and fighting, my friend."

We have a country to put right. There is no time for dithering and delay. There is no time for theatre and drama. It is time to get on with things. In that spirit, I look forward to working together cross-party to shape the change that all of us will bring with this new Government and this new Parliament.

Finally, I will work tirelessly every day to ensure that everyone in Bournemouth East gets the very best, because that is what they deserve; it is what our town deserves.

I dedicate this speech to my brother Joseph and my mother Diane, who are watching from home in Salford. I also dedicate it to the memory of my father, Richard Hayes, who I know is always with me. I owe them more than I could ever say.

3.35 pm

**Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) for that moving speech, and indeed to all Members who have made such amazing maiden speeches this afternoon. I particularly associate myself with the tribute paid by my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride and Strathaven (Joani Reid) to Tessa Jowell, who was also an inspiration to me. I know that she would want, like others, to offer congratulations to the GB Olympic and Paralympic teams, and also to the Three Lions squad—and not only on their successful performance at this year's Paris games and in Germany, but on the inspiration that they provide for people throughout our country and beyond to explore their own potential for sporting achievement, physical activity and wellbeing, enabling them to unlock in themselves the life-changing satisfaction of competing, staying healthy, and being part of a wider grassroots sporting community.

Let me also offer my congratulations to Liam McGarry from Dartford on his fine achievement in taking fifth place in the 107 kg powerlifting at the Paralympics, and on showing us the greatest example of someone who strives to be the best he can in his discipline.

I want to praise the national lottery for its continued investment in our Olympic and Paralympic athletes. It is truly the case—the evidence is clear—that this funding has transformed UK performance in the Olympics and Paralympics, and other international competitions, since the days of underachievement pre-2000. It is critical for this Government, working in partnership with sporting bodies, to build on that success and help to transform the UK into the most physically active nation in Europe. This has been called for by the newly re-formed all-party parliamentary group for sport, brilliantly supported by the Sport and Recreation Alliance—here I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) for her amazing chairship of the APPG over many years—and it is important for us to get behind that call.

We should not be starting from a point at which school sport, for 90% of our population, has been decimated over the past 14 years, and nearly a third of children and young people are now inactive. We should not be starting from a point at which children and young people from the least affluent families remain the least active and are falling further behind, or a point at which more than a third of adults are not meeting the chief medical officer's minimum requirement for physical activity, with obesity and cardiovascular disease the inevitable result.

There are so many reasons why becoming a more active nation is vital for our country's future. We can reduce the burden on the NHS by cutting spending on preventable disease by £1 billion per year. More important, we can take up the challenge laid out by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care by shifting the focus from treating disease to preventing it; moving from being an increasingly unwell population to being a healthier, happier and more prosperous one as a result.

In that we must categorically include mental health and the huge wellbeing benefits to individuals from being fit and active, calculated at £71 billion per year but, in reality, priceless to the individuals concerned. Having served in local government for many years leading public health programmes to tackle health inequalities, I can vouch for the power of sport and physical activity to reach those who public services sometimes find it hard to support, and to promote attainment, inclusion and, above all, good health.

To make those transformative steps forward a reality, we need, among other things, to protect public and national lottery funding for grassroots community sport, recreation and physical activity so that the sector can continue to focus efforts on driving up participation, supporting its volunteers and reducing inequalities. We need to incentivise growth in participation by simplifying and enhancing tax arrangements for sports clubs, gyms, pools and leisure centres. We need a new long-term, joined-up plan to give every child 60 minutes of sport and play a day, and we need to boost our workforce with locally led skills development that aligns with education provision, employee needs, local health and wellbeing, and economic priorities.

Let us build on the amazing legacy of our elite sports teams and the huge commitment of our grassroots sports infrastructure, such as Dartford football club, Dartford Valley community rugby club, Dartford cricket club and our great basketball clubs, the Sharks and the Tigers, as well as Dartford's Central park parkrun, which has just celebrated its 10th anniversary. Let us give our huge commitment to these grassroots sporting organisations to transform the UK into the fit, active and healthy country that we can and need to become.

3.40 pm

**Andrew Lewin** (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): May I say what an uplifting day it has been in the Chamber? We have heard so many personal and impassioned maiden speeches, and it has been a pleasure to listen to them.

I want to try to keep spirits high, because I believe that, without doubt, we live in the greatest elite sporting nation in the world. The Lionesses are the current Euros champions. In just the last few hours, England's cricketers have set the fourth highest test score in 140 years of our great game and are well on their way to a historic victory in Pakistan. Our Olympians through the ages range from Steve Redgrave to Chris Hoy, and from Jessica Ennis-Hill to Keely Hodgkinson. One of our own from Welwyn Hatfield is Louise Fiddes, the 100 metre breaststroke gold medallist in the SB14 classification at the Paris Paralympics just a few months ago—a big part of an astonishing Team GB success.

There is inspiration wherever we look, but I fear that success at the elite level is not translating into grassroots participation on the scale that we would all hope to see. Compared with our European neighbours, we are an inactive nation. Almost a third of children and young adults do less than 30 minutes of physical activity every week, and it will come as no surprise to hear that families from lower socioeconomic groups are being left behind in their physical education and development.

It is our job in this place to work with our communities to champion active lifestyles and maximise the opportunities for all to get involved—for the joy of sport, but for the future of our public health too. Tragically, physical inactivity is associated with one in six deaths, and the

Health Secretary is absolutely right to say that our NHS needs to shift from treating sickness to prevention. By becoming a more active nation, we can cut spending on preventable disease by £1 billion every year. If we get this right, the prize is a healthier and wealthier country.

Sport has a unique power to bring communities together. I am a very amateur cricketer, and one of the joys of the game is being able to play against and alongside people from a host of different backgrounds and lived experiences. In the last couple of months, that has even extended to playing with Conservative MPs in the Lords and Common cricket club. There is a serious point here: the Sport and Recreation Alliance has found that 68% of people believe that community sports clubs and groups play a crucial role in fostering a sense of community in their area.

A small number of people in our country seek to drive a wedge between communities, as we saw this summer with the appalling scenes of violence and disorder. Sport is part of the antidote; a means to bring together people from all walks of life. In my constituency, from Birchwood playing fields in Hatfield to Welwyn Garden City cricket club in Knightsfield, I will take every opportunity to champion sport and physical activity, and I hope to be a small part of a collective national effort. Sorry, Australia, but we are the greatest elite sporting nation on the planet. Now let us set the objective of being the most active nation in the world too.

3.44 pm

**Jonathan Davies** (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I thank all those who have given their maiden speeches today. Each spoke with passion and commitment for all their constituents and for the communities they have been elected to serve. I also congratulate the Team GB and ParalympicsGB athletes for the golden summer of sporting excellence to which they treated us, and for bringing our communities together. The commitment and sacrifices made by these sportsmen and women is inspiring, and too often we do not give them adequate recognition, so I am really pleased that we are having this debate.

It is vital that we ensure that the talent pipeline to sporting excellence is robust and inclusive, so that anybody with the talent and commitment to succeed in sport can do so. Their success adds billions of pounds to the UK economy, brings whole communities together, and inspires those of us who will never compete at an elite level to participate in physical activity for the sake of our health and wellbeing. Local authorities play a key role in ensuring that this continues. They run leisure centres and swimming pools; provide parks and open spaces where people can exercise; manage bowling greens, tennis courts and football pitches; and organise initiatives whereby people can undertake physical activity to improve their health and tackle loneliness. This is essential to reduce pressure on the NHS, and to help people make healthy lifestyle choices and enjoy more years of good physical and mental health.

The leisure centres and sporting facilities provided by councils are also essential to ensure that young people of all backgrounds who have the potential to reach the highest sporting levels can hone their craft. Sport must not be just for those with the recourse to pay, but must give opportunities for young people to begin their journey to being a sporting hero. For those of us who are looking to participate in sports and fitness activities



[Jonathan Davies]

for our health, that has been undermined by the draconian cuts and rising costs faced by local authorities for more than a decade. As a whole, councils have faced a 27% real-terms cut to their core spending power since 2010. Meanwhile, the challenges—the costs and the commitments they must make—have risen significantly.

Leisure centres and sporting facilities are discretionary services. Councils do not have a legal responsibility to provide them—and, in the case of councils having to constantly mitigate the risk of financial meltdown, they have often been the first services to be reduced, subject to increased charges for users, or closed all together. This is an appalling situation that is storing up problems for people's health and wellbeing, as well as for the future sporting prowess of our nation. Despite this, many councils are finding a way forward to protect their sports and leisure provision, including Amber Valley borough council, which went above and beyond to save Belper leisure centre in my constituency from closure last year.

I am pleased that the Labour manifesto commits the new Government to providing greater stability to local authorities by giving them multi-year funding settlements and ending wasteful competitive bidding, but I also encourage Ministers to work with the NHS, integrated care partnerships and integrated care boards to promote the value of what councils can offer and encourage the NHS to maximise the benefit of social prescribing. When councils partner with the NHS, there are benefits for all—council services become more resilient and people benefit from better health.

There is so much for the new Government to do, but I am confident that once they have got the economy back on track after years of mismanagement and wasteful spending, more can be done.

3.48 pm

**Mr Bayo Alaba** (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): I commend and thank hon. Members for all their brilliant maiden speeches. It would be remiss of me not to draw on the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes); this month is Black History Month, and those, like me, of a certain vintage, will remember that West Bromwich Albion in the '70s produced an amazing barnstorming football team, with three brilliant, graceful and very talented footballers at its pinnacle: the late Laurie Cunningham, the late Cyrille Regis, and Brendon Batson.

I too congratulate our Olympians and Paralympians. They have done our country proud, as other Members have said. Having been a community ambassador for the London 2012 Olympics, I understand the Olympic message and the vision it brings to people and communities. It inspires and uplifts communities and, indeed, nations.

I also pay tribute to ATF, a grassroots organisation that works across south Essex, including Southend East and Rochford. ATF is doing fantastic work, using sport to bring people together, to heal community divides and to work with people at risk of exclusion. It is testament to the power of sport in transforming people's lives, particularly those who have had run-ins with the criminal justice system.

Since my election, there have been multiple incidents of knife crime and machete crime on my community's high streets. It is scary for many of us and, if left

unaddressed, it can have detrimental, if not fatal, consequences. Sport is often the point of intervention for young people, equipping them with life skills such as determination and teamwork. It can dramatically improve young people's wellbeing, and it is an opportunity to bring them back into the fold.

I saw this for myself as an amateur football manager. I was part of the leadership team of a large amateur football club—one of the largest in Europe, in fact. At Old Parmeritians football club, we often supported and nurtured young people from within the community. We ensured that they joined a football team, and we supported them. Some of these young players had troubled pasts or were in the wrong networks, so football gave them a network. Being in a team with positive people, and different types of people, helped to shape their lives through grassroots sport.

It is an honour to pay tribute to the success of Team GB and to highlight the importance of local grassroots organisations, such as ATF, that use sport to reduce crime and antisocial behaviour by offering young people a second chance.

3.52 pm

**Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): I warmly congratulate everyone on an excellent debate this afternoon. I particularly welcome the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes). I am sure his family, watching at home in Salford, are extremely proud.

I echo the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) in congratulating the England cricket team on their outstanding performance today. I congratulate Joe Root on overtaking Alastair Cook as England's leading run scorer in test cricket yesterday, and his teammate Harry Brook on his triple century against Pakistan today, before he was cruelly caught on 317 when he was arguably just beginning to get his eye in.

I hung up my hockey stick and put down my squash racket several years ago, since when my enjoyment of sport has largely been as an enthusiastic spectator. It was therefore a genuine honour to meet the inspirational Olympians Rebecca Adlington and Tessa Sanderson at a Women in Sport event earlier this week. Women in Sport celebrates its 40th anniversary this year. Established in 1984, at the heart of Women in Sport lies a deep understanding of the sporting needs of women and girls and a passion to address the stubborn gender inequalities that still exist.

As we celebrate sport today, it is worth reminding ourselves that women's right to compete and play at the highest levels of sport has often been hard-won, and all too recently won. It is just over 50 years since the FA lifted the ban on women playing football at official football grounds. It is only 40 years since women were allowed to compete in the Olympic marathon, and less than 30 years since the first professional boxing match between women was sanctioned in the UK. As we congratulate Women in Sport on its 40th birthday, I urge Members on both sides of the House to reassert our commitment to equality of opportunity in sport; to challenge messaging that young girls are fragile, weak and do not like competition; and instead to reinforce the expectation that girls can be courageous, powerful and fearless in their own way, and are expected to be, and can be, good at sport.

Last Sunday marked World Cerebral Palsy Day. I was privileged to be invited to join the students of William Howard secondary school in my constituency, not only to mark the day but to welcome back former pupil and Paralympian shot put star, Anna Nicholson. Anna was diagnosed with cerebral palsy at a young age and was first introduced to field events by William Howard's former head of PE, Lenny Miller, who incidentally is the father of another great Cumbrian athlete, the hammer throwing star, Nick Miller. Anna, like Nick, began her athletics career at Carlisle's Sheepmount athletics facility, home to the mighty Border Harriers and soon to be home to a new training ground for Carlisle United. What the Blues might currently lack in form on the pitch, we more than make up for with the enthusiasm of our fans, with home crowds regularly exceeding 7,000, a reminder of the unifying power of sport.

Having been encouraged at school, Anna began competing in 2011. She was one of the over 200-strong Team GB who competed in the Tokyo Paralympics, where she placed sixth, but this summer, in Paris, Anna went three places better, bringing home a bronze medal in the F35 shot put. Listening to Anna at William Howard school last week, I could not help but notice the huge impact her words had on disabled and non-disabled pupils alike, because Anna is not just the holder of a Paralympic bronze medal, she is also a chemical engineer and enjoys successful a career in the car production industry. It is absolutely right that Anna's self-proclaimed superpower is to do anything she believes in. Anna is not the only former William Howard pupil to have competed at Olympic and Paralympic level. Having won badminton gold in the 2019 European games in Minsk, Lauren Smith went on to compete in Tokyo, before she was knocked out in the quarter finals.

The joy and success of sport transcend the winning of medals. They can be found in the walking netball, run at the brilliant Currock community centre in my constituency, which this week celebrated 90 years of community activity. From boxing to ladies that lift to keep fit with cake, Currock is a community centre that genuinely offers something for every member of our community. The joy of sport can also be found in the villages of north Cumbria, like Wetheral, where the village hall offers locals pilates, pickleball and swing-fit. And it is to be found in the Cumbria wheelchair sports club, where disabled people can play tennis, basketball and boccia.

As we rightly celebrate the performance of Team GB and ParalympicsGB this summer, let us also celebrate the school staff, amateur coaches, teachers, parents and volunteers who, week in and week out, give their time to support grassroots sport across all our constituencies.

3.59 pm

**Andy MacNae** (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): It is a true pleasure to follow all the wonderful maiden speeches today and to hear that shared commitment to service and community. It really is inspiring. Once again, I feel incredibly proud to be part of this intake. I am also very aware that, when speaking at the end of a debate, there is a danger of repetition, and I apologise in advance for any that may happen. However, I can manage one fresh statistic: Root and Brook's partnership of 454 is the highest ever in English cricket, which is remarkable.

I am so pleased to have this opportunity to speak in this debate and to congratulate and take pride in the wonderful achievements of our Olympic team. My sport is climbing and so I must especially congratulate Toby Roberts for his amazing gold in sport climbing. It was a brilliant competition and, at the risk of a pun, gripping to the very end. It was just a wonderful day for the sport. Back in the day, when I worked at the British Mountaineering Council and, for a period, oversaw the competition programme, we never imagined even the possibility of getting climbing into the Olympics, and it is amazing how far our sport has come.

It is not the only new Olympic sport that is inspiring a new generation. Mountain biking, BMX, skateboarding and even surfing are now on a summer programme and offer a whole new set of opportunities for involvement in a sporting life. There really is now a sport for everyone.

There can be no doubt about the power of inspiration provided by our great British athletes, nor of the power of sport for good, whether that is the positive impact it has on mental and physical health, educational outcomes, social mobility, crime and antisocial behaviour or just plain wellbeing. The evidence is comprehensive and undeniable. Indeed, the excellent 2023 report "Healthy Britain" by my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) makes the case and the solutions crystal clear. Yet for so many young people, the spark of inspiration once lit is allowed to go out all too easily. Although we enjoy the success of our GB athletes, we must recognise that 14 years of austerity has decimated local leisure services and sporting facilities, with the result that, for all too many, there is nowhere to go to pursue a sporting dream or even just an active life.

Although we rightly invest in athletes to provide inspiration and in exemplar facilities for progression, we too often forget those first steps into an active sporting life and the facilities and coaches that enable it. It is those very facilities that have felt the full force of austerity.

As someone who had the leisure portfolio at my local authority for eight years, I have seen the amazing work done by councils and leisure trusts to maintain any sort of leisure provision, while being hit by cut after cut. Despite these best efforts, too many swimming pools and leisure centres have closed. Of those that remain, two thirds of facilities, including all those in my constituency of Rossendale and Darwen, are past their lifespan and at risk of closure or reduced services. Play areas are overgrown, pitches are waterlogged, and so on, and so on—the consequences are there for all to see.

Despite our amazing medal success, we remain a relatively inactive nation. We have heard these stats before, but they bear repetition: more than one third of adults do not meet the chief medical officer's minimum requirements for physical activity; and almost one third of children and young people are inactive, meaning that 12.4 million adults and 2.3 million children and young people do less than 30 minutes of activity a week. Obesity is estimated to cost the UK economy £58 billion a year. The British Heart Foundation estimates that the annual cost to the economy of cardiovascular disease is £19 billion.

It is children and young people from the least affluent families who have been the hardest hit. They remain the least active and are falling further behind. It is in our most deprived areas where we see the most stark evidence

[Andy MacNae]

of gaps in provision and in participation pathways. For children in these areas, horizons can be narrow. To be meaningful and impactful, facilities must be truly local and truly accessible—a kick-about area, a basketball court at the end of the road, a skatepark bouldering area, a pump track in a park that people can walk or ride to, a bike library, a community centre offering indoor sports through the winter, or simply being able to access the countryside that we see every day. That, to me, is the gap that we need to address if we are to complete the pathway from inspiration to sustained participation and perhaps excellence. We need to recognise that the task is beyond the national lottery, Sport England or stressed local authority budgets.

We must connect departmental investment to the benefit that it brings. The Government have rightly prioritised prevention and rejected sticking-plaster solutions. One way that we can turn this intent into action is by properly investing via health, policing, social security and other budgets in delivering the long-term benefits that we know sport and active lifestyles can provide. The evidence is clear, the gap is clear and the opportunity is one that we must grasp.

4.4 pm

**Natasha Irons** (Croydon East) (Lab): I must declare an interest: I will mention Channel 4 in my speech, and I was previously an employee of that organisation.

I am really pleased to speak in today's debate, following an incredibly exciting few months of sport. From the football world cup to the Wimbledon championships and the T20 world cup, whatever sport people were interested in, this summer there was something for everyone. Of course, communities around the world turned their attention to Paris for the Olympic and Paralympic games. Team GB gave a formidable performance, winning 65 medals at the Olympic games, and ParaGB won a massive 124 medals at the Paralympic games, finishing second overall in the medals table. I was delighted to cheer on Croydon's own Thomas Young in the 100-metre sprint at the Paralympics this year. He gave a stellar performance, and I know that people across Croydon will be looking forward to cheering him on at Los Angeles 2028.

There are a number of benefits associated with sports broadcasting, especially when it is available without financial barriers on our publicly owned platforms. Watching the incredible success of our Olympic and Paralympic greats is inspiring, particularly for our children and young people, who might just find themselves a new hero to look up to and a new sport to try. Sport England emphasises the impact that engaging in sport can have on young people, including building positive experiences, improving physical literacy and offering them an environment where they can build confidence in a safe space.

One of the barriers to engaging in physical activity is access, so I am pleased that the Government have committed not just to ensuring that children and young people are being taught the required physical education curriculum but to supporting grassroots football clubs, local community groups and widening opportunity so that as many people as possible can get involved in physical activity. I pay tribute to one of the many grassroots organisations based in my constituency of

Croydon East—an organisation that I recently had the pleasure of visiting. The Croydon Harriers train at Croydon Arena alongside another wonderful grassroots club, Croydon FC. They work to give young people and children sporting opportunities such as training camps and after-school clubs, and they are part of the fabric of the local community.

However, in Britain today not all young people have access to such wonderful organisations. For too many young people and adults with disabilities, opportunities to get involved in sport can feel inaccessible. Sport England has found that those with disabilities are twice as likely to be inactive as those without a disability, and the charity Activity Alliance found that only 25% of disabled children are regular participating in PE lessons. Those numbers are far too low, but the high-profile coverage of the Paralympic games put out by Channel 4 is helping to change perceptions of para sport, bring new audiences and increase participation.

Channel 4's 2022 report, 10 years on from the 2012 Paralympics, revealed that over two thirds of the UK's population tuned into the games, and that 76% of people said the channel's "Meet the Superhumans" campaign opened their eyes to what disabled people can be capable of. Almost three quarters of viewers aged between 12 and 16 said they were more comfortable talking about disabilities after Channel 4's coverage. Viewership of the games this year reached record highs, with 20 million viewers across linear and streaming platforms, attracting a larger proportion of young people than other channels. That is the impact that public service broadcasting can have. Our Paralympians were already brilliant and doing amazing things in their sport. What they needed was a platform to inspire our nation.

Sport can change lives. It can connect us and inspire us. I think I speak for Members across the House when I say that we are so proud of Team GB and ParaGB's performance in this year's games. I want to thank them for their contribution to our nation's story, for their incredible talent, and for inspiring a nation.

4.8 pm

**Alan Gemmell** (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): It is a great privilege to have listened to so many of my colleagues' maiden speeches this afternoon, including my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride and Strathaven (Joani Reid) and my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales), whose—rightly very proud—mum was in the Chamber.

In today's debate, we have heard about the importance of sport in communities across the UK, and I want to share with the House the truly inspirational achievements of my constituent Kayleigh Haggo, a Paralympian from Ayr. Kayleigh is a six-time world record holder in frame running, and was preparing to win gold in Paris this year when she was told two years ago that her sport would not be included in the games. In her own words, it felt like her whole world crashed around her, but with true Olympian spirit, Kayleigh spent the last two years becoming one of the best boccia players, and is ranked 13th in the world. She was selected for Team GB and made it all the way to the quarter-finals in Paris. This is a truly inspirational feat.

We are all so very proud of what Kayleigh has achieved by representing Ayrshire in Team GB. I tried to contact Kayleigh to suggest that she might want to



watch this debate, but it seems that she has a more important thing going on: it is her wedding day. I hope that the House will join me in congratulating her on her achievements, and on this very special day.

4.9 pm

**Sam Rushworth** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) about repetition when speaking this late in a debate; I am aware that I am probably the only thing standing between hon. Members and trains back to constituencies, so I will try not to be long-winded. I am grateful for this debate and to those who spoke; if oracy were an Olympic sport, many of our maiden speakers today would be medallists and, as with most sports, I would be grateful just to take part.

Across this House, people are rightly proud of the achievements of our great British Olympians. I am proud particularly of the consistency of our performance in the Paralympics, because it says something about who we are as a nation. I refer not to Governments of either colour, but to the spirit of the British people.

However, it is important that we do not allow our celebrations of British sporting success at an elite level to conceal the wide inequalities of access to sport and physical activity. One third of Team GB's medallists went to private schools. I do not mean to disparage them—only sheer hard work and perseverance could lead them to achieve what they did—but when privately educated young people are four times more likely than children in the state sector to get an Olympic medal, we have to ask: what are we doing to ensure that all young people have the opportunities and support to participate and achieve in sports?

Almost half the 1,400 member schools of the Independent Schools Council have their own swimming pools, 759 have astroturf pitches, and nearly 100 offer rowing on their own lakes and rivers. Meanwhile, in the state sector, 223 school playing fields were sold off between 2010 and 2020. As others have already noted, the Department for Education reports that there were 41,000 fewer hours of PE taught in the 2023-24 academic year compared with 2011-12. That has led to a situation in which fewer than half of children from less affluent backgrounds are meeting the chief medical officer's guideline of 60 minutes of physical activity a day. I understand that there are pressures on public finances, but mark my words: any savings that we make now by failing to deliver improvements in school and community sports will cost us in the future through increases in childhood obesity and diabetes, which will add to future NHS bills.

We are heading in the wrong direction. The Conservative and Lib Dem-controlled Durham county council—it was under Labour control until 2021—has cancelled and delayed upgrades to leisure facilities. The town of Crook, which has a population of 10,000 people, lost its swimming baths over a decade ago, and several attempts since to bring them back have ended only in disappointment. It is not just young people who are affected. I remember vividly a conversation I had while canvassing; an older woman in her 80s told me of her sorrow at the closure of the swimming baths, and of having to take two buses—an hour and a half's round trip—to where I live, in Bishop Auckland, for the nearest swimming pool. That has meant that she no longer goes. She is missing

out not only on physical activity but on interaction with her friends; she said it was the thing in the week that she had most looked forward to.

Sport is therefore not just about physical health, but about loneliness and isolation. In schools, it is also about the intrinsic curriculum.

I was not blessed with great physical co-ordination, but I will always be grateful to my PE teacher, Mr Brown, who did not allow me to use that or my asthma as an excuse. He got me on the running track, told me to push myself, and put me in the school athletics team. As many do, I learned through sports how to push myself, how to strive for a personal best, how to play fair, how to work as a team, and how to be magnanimous in the very occasional victory and frequently humble in defeat. I learned that sport brings people together and is great fun.

Finally, I will focus on the mental health benefits of sport. Today is World Mental Health Day. I recently met ManHealth, a group of men in my constituency who get together on a Thursday night. Perhaps in order to break down the stigma of mental health, I shared my own experience of struggling with depression and anxiety—including in the time since I joined this place—which can often be hidden with a suit and a smile. One of the young men asked to see me afterwards. He had grown up in the care system, and talked to me about his struggles with anger, temper management and in feeling loved and accepted. He felt acceptance and self-esteem through playing rugby, and he is going to try out for a team—I will not reveal which team for the sake of protecting his identity. I was incredibly impressed by him and his candour.

Several of my colleagues have made excellent recommendations today that do not need repeating, but I appeal to colleagues across the House not just to pay lip service on this. My local authority has faced cuts of 60% to its central Government funding, and the chief executive told me recently that we are in the territory of closing libraries and leisure centres, so we cannot just pay lip service. There is no development without human development. We should be striving to make Britain the most active nation on earth over the next decade, and end that decline.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** Before I call the Front Benchers, may I pass on the congratulations of the whole House to the constituent of the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Alan Gemmell), Kayleigh Haggio, on her wedding day? It is probably an adequate excuse not to be watching the speech of her newly elected Member of Parliament. With the leave of the House, I call Louie French.

4.17 pm

**Mr Louie French** (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is my pleasure to close the debate for His Majesty's official Opposition.

"Inspire a Generation" was the motto of the London games delivered by the previous Conservative Government. Throughout the debate, we have heard from Members on both sides of the House about the inspirational stories from each and every constituency represented here today. We heard from the hon. Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda) about the important role that the

[Mr Louie French]

armed forces play, particularly in disability sports, and about the challenge faced by his local football club, Reading FC.

The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson), who is not here right now, spoke about the physical and mental health challenges and benefits of sport—and about his haircut's likeness to Alan Shearer's, which was interesting. We heard a fantastic maiden speech from the hon. Member for Warrington South (Sarah Hall). I hope that she has successfully secured significant brownie points for mentioning her husband and father-in-law. As a former rugby league player, I know her local club, Warrington Wolves, very well—I do not think I had many victories there during my youth.

We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Droitwich and Evesham (Nigel Huddleston), who was a fantastic Sports Minister. I pay tribute to him for his dedication and efforts in that post, and for supporting the shadow team in our new roles. We heard from the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), who spoke about his passion for tennis, about the APPG for tennis, and about the fantastic park tennis project, which I am pleased has, alongside Bexley council, improved three courts in my constituency.

We heard the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade), who I hope has better balance on those paddle boards than I do. We also heard the maiden speech of the hon. Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes), who mentioned her local football club, the Baggies. As a London MP, I could make lots of comments about her former boss, Sadiq Khan, but given the context of the debate, I think I will move on swiftly.

We had a maiden speech from the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire). I hate to break it to him, but I also prefer the jam first in my cream tea; I also enjoy a Cornish pasty, as Members can probably tell. We also had a maiden speech from the hon. Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper), who highlighted the fantastic career of Paula Radcliffe and other local athletes and para-athletes, including his mum. As always, we heard a fantastic speech from my friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). In his passionate speech, he particularly highlighted a gymnast from his community whose sporting achievements, including that gold medal performance in Paris, have inspired people in Northern Ireland. Like the hon. Member, I do not think I would last too long on a pommel horse.

We had a maiden speech from the new hon. Member for Mansfield (Steve Yemm), who spoke with great passion about his new seat. I am sure the former Member for Mansfield will appreciate his kind words today: Ben is not only a great colleague, but a fantastic goalkeeper for our annual football match against the Lobby team. We also had a maiden speech from the hon. Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore)—I apologise if I have missed anyone, but there were quite a lot of maiden speeches today. We heard about Redditch's links to Led Zeppelin and Harry Styles and the hon. Member's love of local roundabouts. I cannot see him in the Chamber, but I have a bad joke here: I was going to say that those roundabouts are perhaps a good background for his Government's upcoming U-turns. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] Sorry.

We had a maiden speech from the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles (Michael Wheeler). We heard about his love of Eccles cakes and a cheeky Vimto, and the Speaker came up. I can tell the hon. Member that having your own mum as a constituent is an experience I know only too well—he should make sure that he listens to his mum. We had a maiden speech from the hon. Member for Corby and East Northamptonshire (Lee Barron), who referenced a constituent who was a BMX silver medallist. We also heard a fantastic maiden speech from the new hon. Member for East Kilbride and Strathaven (Joani Reid), who mentioned the Caledonia Gladiators basketball team and the rich local sporting heritage that she enjoys in her constituency, and heard other fantastic maiden speeches from the new hon. Members for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales) and for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes). I think I have covered everyone; if I have not, I apologise. It has been a well-themed debate across the House, and we have rightly celebrated the performances of our athletes and para-athletes.

To return to my actual speech, the Paris Olympic games saw 327 fantastic British athletes compete—almost as many as there are new Members in this place—and 65 medals won, with a deeply proud nation watching along. There can be no doubt that the London 2012 Olympic legacy is alive and well and continues to inspire the future of British sport. The legacy that we have heard about today was made possible by record levels of investment, particularly from the national lottery and the Conservative Governments over this period, investment that was made in the face of the Olympic-sized hole in the budget left by the Labour party in 2010. We have always been committed to our athletes and clubs, from the grassroots to the Olympics, and we remain committed; that was especially the case during the pandemic, when our Government invested an unparalleled £1.6 billion of emergency funding through the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, supporting well over 200,000 jobs and 5,000 organisations. Even in some of the most difficult economic circumstances, the Conservative party has always backed our athletes with the funding they need to compete at the highest level.

That is why I, and the sporting industry more broadly, remain disappointed that Government Ministers have yet to confirm the future funding for sport in our country. Since the election, we have seen an Olympic games open and close, we have seen a Paralympic games open and close, and we have seen the Government lose a chief of staff in fewer than 100 days—perhaps not an Olympic record, but almost certainly a British one. Our constituents and the athletes we have been celebrating today deserve an answer from the Government about their future: not next week, not in a month's time, but today. As Ministers will know, British athletes need to know whether they are going to be funded during the next Olympic cycle leading up to the Los Angeles games in 2028, and to what extent. They need to know what equipment they can afford and when they can afford it.

Equally importantly, our world-leading coaches need to know whether the funding will be there to enable them to continue training British athletes over the next four years. Otherwise, we risk competitor nations luring them away to emulate our world Olympic and Paralympic preparations—nations around the world are already beginning to copy our model of athlete development.

Our football clubs need clarity on when Labour will bring forward the football governance Bill, while horseracing and the gambling industry are still in the dark over Labour's plans. Labour Members repeat their confected line about the state of the economy almost as often as they draw breath, but this Government are creating a black hole of uncertainty at the heart of British sport. We urge them to hold the line, bite down on their gumshields, and ensure that our athletes and UK Sport have the support they need and the certainty they deserve.

4.25 pm

**The Lord Commissioner of His Majesty's Treasury (Vicky Foxcroft):** I wanted to start by saying—and I originally wrote this down—what a collegiate and comradely debate this had been, and until the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French), stood up again it actually was.

I was particularly impressed that my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) congratulated the Secretary of State on Wigan Wanderers' win over Leigh Leopards, although she followed that by quickly pointing out that there was a boxing club in her constituency.

I thought the former Minister for Sport, the hon. Member for Droitwich and Evesham (Nigel Huddleston), gave an excellent speech, with lots of really good advice to the Minister for Sport—the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock)—and I am sure she will take some of that on board. He certainly made me chuckle a bit.

I thank all those who contributed to this debate, and I am sorry if I am not able to reference everybody individually, but it really has been a busy debate. It has been a pleasure to hear about and reflect on another wonderful summer of Olympic and Paralympic performance. Not only are such performances a matter of pride for the country, but they inspire a nation.

I know the Minister and the shadow Minister referred to him, but it would be remiss of me not to take advantage of being at the Dispatch Box to mention our Alex Yee MBE of Brockley in my constituency of Lewisham North, who won the gold in the men's triathlon, and I just thought I would share a little story with everyone. In areas where we have placards saying Brockley, they have now been renamed "Brockyee", and hon. Members can look online if they want to see them.

Alex Yee did us all proud, as did all of the other Olympians and Paralympians, including Cindy Ngamba—she was in the Gallery earlier—whose achievements were so eloquently expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton North East (Kirith Entwistle).

The Government value sport that, with the right support, can and will contribute so much to how we deliver our priority missions. I should declare an interest in that, as recorded in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, I was fortunate enough to attend the Paralympic games in Paris and see our athletes in action in sessions of athletics, cycling and swimming. The obvious highlights were seeing Brock Whiston win the silver medal in the 100 metres breaststroke and Archie Atkinson win silver in the C4 4,000 metres individual pursuit.

I was not able to see all the Paralympians, but as a smart Whip, it would be wrong of me not to mention Gregg Stevenson—the good friend from his school

years of my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford)—who won gold in the PR2 mixed doubles rowing and broke a world record. I did not know that he had trained in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda), or about the immense impact he has had on so many people.

Perhaps my greatest reflection is that these athletes are at the top of their performance pathways. There is so much that we as a Government can and will do to support all parts of that pathway, whether people are aiming to take their first sporting steps or to set a world record. The Olympic and Paralympic games are a rare opportunity to demonstrate the sheer variety of sports in which to take those first sporting steps. There is a whole world of sport and activity out there, and one that we will ensure offers access and opportunity to as many individuals as possible. My hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor) passionately made the case for grassroots clubs and activities for all, from the young to older people, to be that pipeline, but also for everyone's physical and mental health.

The Minister, in opening the debate, spoke of the opportunity for sport to contribute to the Government's missions. She also said—perhaps the shadow Minister was not listening—that we are committed to multi-year funding. We have not been in power very long, so we are still getting used to the different terms, and we are moving at speed although perhaps not as quickly as the Opposition would like. The most obvious element of this potential is the health mission, as small increases in physical activity can have such holistic health benefits. That was eloquently put by my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), who passionately spoke about both the cultural and health benefits of tennis, with participants living on average 9.7 years longer.

Yet sport can and does impact much more widely in society as well, and it can be particularly influential in engaging young people. I am personally hugely invested in how sports can contribute to safer communities for them. My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) rightly pointed out the need to invest in our young people. There are some excellent examples of how young people can be engaged in sports and social activities, with access to mentors and further opportunities providing wider positive messages, and they can be shown alternatives to violent influences.

**Jonathan Davies:** Will the Minister join me in recognising the contributions of community trusts, such as those at Derby County and Chesterfield football clubs, in filling the gaps left by local authorities, who have suffered huge cuts, especially in regard to youth provision?

**Vicky Foxcroft:** My hon. Friend makes a really important point. If we are putting clubs on the record, may I add my local football club of Millwall, whose community trust does excellent work in the local community?

It is important that young people are able to make informed choices away from crime and violence, and towards a future that need not lead them into the justice system but instead provides them with opportunities to thrive. Working across Government, that is our mission.



[Vicky Foxcroft]

I want to touch on the excellent maiden speeches that we have heard today. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Sarah Hall) gave a passionate speech, championing her seat and former local women leaders, and I hope that her presence is present enough for her husband Tom—I wish him a happy birthday and am sure that he is extremely proud of her.

The hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) spoke about her beautiful constituency, although I think I remember her calling some parts of it Shitterton and Happy Bottom—she did. I was rather nervous when my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) mentioned Tom Watson, because I once mentioned him while giving a speech at a Friends of Labour Students event and might have slightly regretted it afterwards, so I think we should just stick with the sons of toolmakers.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire) used his maiden speech to campaign for a Cornish team at the Commonwealth games, and I wish him luck with that. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) spoke about his constituency being an events capital, making me want an invite to join the banquet, but I was also very interested in the annual pina colada festival.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Steve Yemm) spoke of his life journey and how he wants to ensure everyone has the same opportunity. My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) gave an amusing speech, namechecking many people from his constituency, including Harry Styles several times. My hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles (Michael Wheeler) spoke about tea and cakes. I would not like to say which cake is my favourite, but I will say I was born in Chorley. [Interruption.] I did not say which one was my favourite.

My hon. Friend the Member for Corby and East Northamptonshire (Lee Barron) spoke about the importance of fighting for workers' rights and how he was such a strong advocate in doing so before entering Parliament, and I am certain he will be a strong voice here in Parliament. My hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride and Strathaven (Joani Reid) spoke

passionately about campaigners and champions from her constituency saving businesses, saving jobs and showing the talent of women. I know she will be a doughty champion for her constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales) spoke personally about his challenges growing up and how those made him want to make changes in politics, and I am glad he has finally made it here. In the final maiden speech today, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) paid the most fitting tribute to Tobias Ellwood, who was the first to try to save the life of PC Keith Palmer, to whom we all owe a great debt of gratitude. In finishing this part of my speech, I will just say that I know how nerve-racking it can be to do a maiden speech. You were all absolutely excellent—sorry, they were all absolutely excellent. [Laughter.] See, we can all make mistakes at times. I am genuinely glad that they chose this debate to do so.

Today, we have heard about the importance of sport in its many forms in the country. The 2024 Olympic and Paralympic games may have passed, but enjoying sporting performances of football and rugby is still part of the regular routine for many of us during the winter months. The nights may be closing in, but millions are out there daily, logging their runs, playing five-a-side under newly funded floodlights or trying a new sport for the first time.

The Government are focused on delivering against our five core missions, and sport can do so much in many of these spaces. It can be instrumental in breaking down barriers and creating opportunities. The sector can and will contribute to economic growth, and sport and physical activity can and will improve the health of the nation served by the NHS. That is why I will be working with my ministerial colleagues to ensure that sport is a key part of delivering across health and our other missions, and to ensure that we can reflect on the continued success of our elite athletes for many years to come.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered sport and the performance of Team GB and ParalympicsGB in 2024.

## Cost of Rail Fares

*Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Christian Wakeford.)*

4.38 pm

**Mr Will Forster** (Woking) (LD): I wish to address the deeply concerning issue of rising rail fares, which are having a profound impact on my constituents in Woking and, indeed, on commuters across the country. Since 2019, the cost of a season ticket from Woking to Waterloo has increased by £773—it now stands at an astonishing £4,516. When people are struggling with the cost of living crisis, these eye-watering fare rises are not only unfair, but counterproductive. If we are serious about promoting economic growth and tackling climate change, we must make public transport an affordable and attractive option for everyone. Instead, rail travel has become a luxury that many are finding they can no longer afford, ironically risking debt to earn a living. That is not acceptable.

Worse still, these rising costs come alongside an increasingly unreliable service. A freedom of information request revealed that more than 55,000 rush-hour trains were either partially or fully cancelled last year. That was a 10% rise on the year before and the worst record since 2019. UK passengers are being railed with a terrible ask: to pay more for a deteriorating service. That is just not something I am willing to get on board with. We need to get back on track and secure a fair deal for passengers.

But this is not just about rail fares. One of my new constituents, Joanna from West Byfleet, shared her experience of the unsafe conditions at West Byfleet station's car park, where inadequate lighting and overgrown vegetation have created an isolated and unsafe environment at night. Despite multiple complaints to South Western Railway, little has been done to improve the conditions. That is just one of many examples where passengers are being let down, and that is extra to the issue of cost.

I want to highlight the plight of Katie, another Woking constituent who has voiced her frustration at the lack of fast trains from Woking that stop at Clapham Junction during peak hours. After the 7.13 am service, there is a gap of over 90 minutes without fast trains stopping at Clapham—a key station on our network—forcing commuters like Katie to take longer and more expensive routes. Those are not isolated incidents or examples; they are part of a broader pattern of neglect that commuters across our communities face.

Now is the time for the Government to act. The Liberal Democrats and I are calling for an immediate freeze on rail fares, which would save commuters in Woking £140 a year, and I am sure that it would save commuters across the country similar sums. That policy is not only affordable but necessary. Rail fares should not continue to rise while services decline.

Do hon. Members see where I am going with this? We need long-term reform. The current ticketing system is fragmented and confusing, with passengers left paying more for less. We need a simplified, fair and affordable fare structure that works for everyone. I am aware of the Government's nationalisation plans and the Bills before the House as well as the creation of Great British Rail, but ultimately people are not interested in whether trains are run by private companies or public ones. My constituents want trains that are affordable, safe and reliable. The Conservative Government's failure to

deliver on that has left commuters in Woking and beyond paying the price of Tory chaos. There are no Conservative Members in the Chamber to argue with me, which shows how little they care about the issue. Let us ensure that we do not repeat in this Parliament the mistakes that the Conservatives made.

Next year will be the 200th anniversary of our railways. We have a real opportunity to freeze rail fares and make 2025 the year we give passengers a fair deal.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes)**: There are a number of Members in the Chamber this evening. I know that some have secured agreement from the hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster) to participate in the debate, and that is perfectly in order, but I remind the House that the debate is time-limited and I expect that the Minister will be given plenty of time to reply to any points raised. It therefore may not be possible to accommodate everybody who wishes to participate.

4.43 pm

**Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr Forster) for securing this important debate and thank both him and the Minister for the opportunity to speak.

My hon. Friend eloquently articulated the cost and train service challenges facing his constituents on the south-west main line. Many of them are shared by my constituents in Didcot and Wantage in their commuting experience on the great western main line between Didcot and London Paddington. An annual season ticket on this route, without any London travelcard addition, for the 53 miles in each direction costs £6,300. A peak-hour day return is £81. Sadly, few commuters can benefit from travelling off peak. In part that is because the evening peak period for fast trains lasts from 15.33 until 19.21—nearly four hours. Such a long peak period can create significant overcrowding on the first and last off-peak trains, which is not an effective use of the capacity available.

Given that we are frequently told that travelling volumes are lower than before the pandemic, it feels like a missed opportunity that such harsh rush-hour restrictions have not been reformed. To save money, some of my constituents choose to double their journey time by using slower, local trains instead of intercity ones, which is less than convenient.

As well as supporting my hon. Friend's calls for fare freezes and wider service improvements, I make two broader observations. First, as so often with rail policy, the key questions for the Government are: how much do they wish our railways to be used, and how much do they wish the railways to deliver their potential for wider economic value? To make the most of the high and generally fixed costs associated with infrastructure and operations, making the ticketing system comprehensible and affordable will help to increase the volume of fare revenue, as well as the yield from each fare.

Secondly, the fact that so many people in the south-east of England have long and expensive commutes by train is surely partly a product of London's profoundly unaffordable housing market. As so often, transport policy does not, or should not, exist in a vacuum.

4.45 pm

**Mr Lee Dillon** (Newbury) (LD): Residents in my constituency are fortunate that they can reach the capital in about 45 minutes. However, with Paddington sitting in the west of London, weekday day trippers only get a limited amount of time to spend in London if they want to enjoy off-peak rates. Great Western Railway does run an afternoon service direct to Newbury, but the final train is at 16.05, just five minutes into peak time. That means that my constituents have to pay the extra peak-time charge, or wait three hours for off peak to kick back in. My constituent Elizabeth Capewell has asked whether those with a senior or disabled travel card could use the 16.05 service, which would make travel to London much easier and much more worthwhile. I hope that train operators and the Government take that plea on board.

4.46 pm

**Luke Taylor** (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr Forster) for bringing us this debate and giving us an opportunity to raise constituents' concerns and wider Liberal Democrat priorities. I thank the Minister for attending and giving responses to our points.

I begin by raising the case, as I did this morning, of the poor rail services to Worcester Park station, which are affecting my constituents' quality of life. They are unable to collect their children from school, and they are missing family meals. They are unable to rely on the train service and fear for their safety if they have to wait for a taxi late at night when the train does not come.

I want to broaden the discussion to investment in our rail infrastructure. In early 2023, the previous Government announced much-vaunted funding for upgrades to the Belmont rail line. Some £14.1 million was awarded from the levelling-up fund to dual-track part of the line to allow train frequency to be increased to four an hour in each direction by the addition of a passing loop at Belmont station. Such an increase in accessibility would massively benefit my constituents, but it is also key to getting the best out of the cancer hub site that Sutton council has been so ambitious in investing in. That incredibly advanced, world-leading cancer research centre in south-west London will benefit not just Sutton and Cheam but the whole of London. Does the Minister agree that investing in these infrastructure upgrades, as well as concentrating on getting value for money from existing services, is critical to allowing residents to make sustainable transport choices? Does he also agree that it is critical to unleashing the economic benefits of investment, such as in the Institute of Cancer Research in Sutton and Cheam, to allowing us to achieve our net zero climate goals and to boosting the economy, which the Government seem keen to support?

4.48 pm

**Zöe Franklin** (Guildford) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr Forster) for raising this important topic. As the MP for Guildford, I can speak for those of my constituents who commute, and I share in their pain on the daily commute from Guildford. Every single week, residents suffer terrible service on the trains, with delays and general problems. It is no wonder, then, that constituents who commute to London and many other locations across the south-east and beyond feel incredibly frustrated by the fact that fees

continue to rise while the service continues to deteriorate. Will the Minister commit not just to hold train companies to account more effectively, but to ask them to freeze rail fares until their services improve?

**Victoria Collins** (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): In Harpenden, commuters face the absurd reality that a single off-peak ticket can cost £18.40, but 11 minutes further on people can get an Oyster fare at Radlett for £5.90. Does my hon. Friend agree that this absurd and unfair pricing system needs to be reviewed?

**Zöe Franklin**: I agree, and I completely understand the ridiculousness of train fares across different areas. I have incredibly high train fares for travelling very small distances in my constituency, which it is deeply frustrating.

Commuters find the situation frustrating because they want to switch to trains. If we are serious about tackling the climate crisis and encouraging people to switch their mode of transport to the railways, we must address both reliability and train fares. People look at the train service and say, "It is not convenient, it is not reliable and it is expensive." We must stop train fares rising, because we need to encourage people to get out of their cars and choose the sustainable transport method that is the railway.

4.50 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood)**: I congratulate the hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster) on securing this debate on rail fares, and all Members who have made contributions this evening.

For the past 200 years, our railways have been at the heart of our transport network. During that time, they have played an essential role in enabling people to travel across our country, visit their loved ones and seize economic opportunities. This Government are committed to getting our railways back on track, which is why we are already delivering major reforms to fix our country's broken rail network, in the context of a challenging fiscal inheritance. They include the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Bill, which will potentially save taxpayers up to £150 million every year in fees alone once all franchises are in public ownership.

Reform and public ownership are essential to delivering further fares reform. The current system is fragmented, with train operators that take no revenue risk making decisions on aspects of fares and ticketing. That is hampering the Government's ability to make the fares system fit for purpose. Public ownership will allow a joined-up approach to be taken across the network.

**Tim Roca** (Macclesfield) (Lab): In Macclesfield we have the pleasure of being served by both Avanti and Northern trains, unfortunately. The previous Conservative Government handed Avanti yet another franchise, despite its being one of the least reliable operators in the previous year. Does my hon. Friend agree that our plans for Great British Rail will not only improve reliability but ensure that rather than profits being repatriated to Italy, they are used for the public good here at home?

**Simon Lightwood**: I agree, and I can assure my hon. Friend that in the very first week, when the Secretary of State took office, she summoned a number of companies to her office to hold them to account. They will be held to account, and we are determined to see improvements.



Fares revenue is crucial to funding day-to-day railway operations, as well as Government priorities to put passengers first and improve performance on the railway. However, I recognise the serious concern that consumers have about the cost of rail fares. The affordability of the railway is a key objective for this Government, making sure that, wherever possible, prices are kept at a point that works for both passengers and taxpayers. A rise in rail fares can affect the family budgets of working people, including commuters between Woking and London.

Rail fares have always been an emotive subject, and rises in fares are often contentious. In that context, it is vital that passengers know that they are getting value for money. That is why this Government are committed to reviewing the overly complicated fares system with a view to simplifying it. The regulation surrounding the fares system is rooted in the privatisation of the 1990s, so there will be many opportunities to modernise the fares system as we move towards establishing Great British Railways and bringing forward the legislation needed to take on fares, ticketing and other operational aspects of the railway.

However, there is progress we can make now in improving fares and ticketing. We are progressing the expansion of simpler, easier and more flexible pay-as-you-go ticketing across the south-east. Along with simplified ticketing, pay as you go with contactless offers passengers a best price guarantee on the day. For most passengers, it will always provide them with the best price for a single day's travel. We are also considering how simplifying long-distance fares can unlock better-value opportunities for passengers, as well as smoothing demand to make the best use of capacity while minimising crowding.

**James MacCleary** (Lewes) (LD): Rail fares from my constituency of Lewes to London have increased by 20% since 2020, meaning that if increases go ahead this year, a commuter from Lewes will incur £5,500 of cost for a season ticket. For many people whose salaries have not increased in recent years while the cost of living has gone up, that is a major cost. We have seen quite a lot of success capping bus fares in recent years. For some of our local users that has been an improvement. Will the Minister support a similar cap on rail fares?

**Simon Lightwood:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Affordability is one of our six key objectives, so that prices, wherever possible, are kept at an affordable point that works for both passengers and taxpayers.

We are supporting LNER to offer its Simpler Fares trial tickets between London and stations around Newcastle, Berwick-upon-Tweed and Edinburgh from 30 September this year. Naturally, we will evaluate carefully before taking further decisions. LNER has published on its website the opportunities the trial offers, including the new 70-minute flex tickets between Newcastle and London, priced at £45 subject to availability. The ticket offers a degree of flexibility at nearly £40 cheaper than the old super off-peak. LNER sets out that, overall, around half of standard class 70-minute flex tickets sold have been cheaper than the old super off-peak, according to its latest figures.

In addition, those and the vast majority of other tickets on LNER are now sold on a single-leg basis, where a single costs approximately half the price of the previous return ticket rather than being priced within a

pound of the return, as was often the case. That allows passengers to pay only for what they need by mixing and matching the right ticket for them for each leg of their journey, for example advance tickets with flexible tickets, or peak with off-peak where those exist.

There is a large range of railcards available to make rail travel more affordable for some, with at least a third off the cost of most rail tickets. Once established, I would expect Great British Railways to take a fresh look at the railcard suite, so that we can encourage the highest possible number of passengers to use our railways.

Woking is part of South Western Railway's critical corridor between Woking and London Waterloo, and is therefore key to ensuring strong operational performance. South Western Railway recorded an 87% overall satisfaction rating in the Transport Focus rail user survey in September this year.

**Helen Maguire** (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Many of my constituents commute into London for work, and they complain that since the pandemic the number of trains has halved. They express their dread at the prospect of squeezing on to yet another train. Despite the reduction in service and the subsequent overcrowding, prices have increased. Residents tell me that they pay extraordinary prices for sub-par service. Does the Minister agree with me that as a principle—

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. I made the point earlier this week that interventions need to be short. They are not mini speeches, they should be spontaneous and they should not be read out. Perhaps the hon. Lady has finished her comments.

**Simon Lightwood:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. If she would like to follow up with me in writing so that she can finish the rest of her point, I would be more than happy to pass it on.

South Western Railway also offers innovative products that let passengers choose tickets that suit their needs, such as the Touch smartcard. This allows tickets to be added to a smartcard online, via an app or from ticket machines at a station. In recent months there has been an issue with a specific set of points at Woking, for which a temporary fix has been found. In the medium term, a more permanent solution will need to be sought, which may cause the temporary closure of lines for planned engineering.

For the commuter, season tickets are still a great way to save money on travel and are available on a smartcard. For two to three-day-a-week commuters, the flexible season ticket offers further savings against traditional season tickets. In Woking, flexible season tickets offer two and three-day-a-week commuters into London better value than both anytime day tickets and standard season tickets.

5 pm

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).*

*Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Christian Wakeford.)*

**Simon Lightwood:** We know that across the country people rely on trains to get to work, get to school, and see their loved ones. That is why we are relentlessly focused on securing improved services for passengers, along with better value for money for taxpayers.

[Simon Lightwood]

I thank the hon. Member for Woking for securing the debate. I am sure he appreciates that rail plays an important part in people's lives across the country, and especially in his constituency. This Government are putting passengers at the heart of the railway, and I want to reassure Members that we are working hard

on putting in place reforms that will create stronger, more reliable railways that work for the people who use them.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.1 pm

*House adjourned.*

# Westminster Hall

*Thursday 10 October 2024*

[PETER DOWD *in the Chair*]

## Mental Health Support

1.30 pm

**Sojan Joseph** (Ashford) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered improving support for mental health.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Dowd, and I am pleased to have secured this important debate. As today is World Mental Health Day, it is particularly appropriate that we have the opportunity to raise awareness of mental health issues and the mental health system in this country. It is important to reflect on how far we have come in this country in removing the stigma around mental health, and I hope this Parliament will play its part in continuing that progress. However, if we are to do so, we must be honest about the many challenges we still face. I also want to declare a personal interest: before being elected in July, I spent 22 years working in the NHS, primarily in mental health.

One of my main motivations in standing for Parliament was to play my part in building an NHS fit for the future. Improving support for mental health will be an integral part of that. With that in mind, I want to put on record my thanks to my former NHS colleagues working in the mental health system. They do an incredible job in incredibly difficult circumstances. It is important to say at the outset of this debate that any criticisms of the current system are not directed at the workforce. Without their hard work and dedication, the problems faced by those in need of mental health services would be far worse. I know from my own experience that in recent years, their work has often been made more difficult by policies imposed at a national level by the last Government. Even when it was clear that those policies were having a detrimental impact, Ministers were unwilling to make concessions.

Although the mental health workforce has expanded in recent years, it has only reached the same number of staff as it had when the last Labour Government were in office in 2010. More needs to be done regarding the recruitment and retention of staff, as underlined by the high number of vacancies. NHS data shows that in September last year, there were 28,600 vacancies, amounting to 19% of the total workforce and causing an increased reliance on agency staff. In the year to September 2023, there was a 19% turnover in the overall workforce. Those figures from the King's Fund highlight the extent of the recruitment and retention crisis.

From my work as a manager in mental health services, I know that experienced staff play a vital role, and a vast amount of time has to be spent recruiting new experienced staff when they move on to different posts. That has meant that often the most challenging environments have been run by staff with the least experience. That obviously has a negative impact on patient care and can lead to an increased incidence of aggression and abuse of staff. It is therefore not a

surprise to see staff shortages having a negative impact on staff morale. The King's Fund has shown that in in-patient services, staff regularly work extra hours or additional shifts and often find themselves in environments and with patients they are unfamiliar with. Similarly, staff in community services say they are worn out and find their work frustrating and stressful.

For 14 years, we have had a string of Prime Ministers and Ministers speaking about achieving parity of esteem between physical and mental health in the NHS. While I do not doubt the intentions behind achieving that goal, after 14 years of Conservative Government we do not have that parity. Indeed, as Lord Darzi made clear in his excellent report:

"There is a fundamental problem in the distribution of resources between mental health and physical health. Mental health accounts for more than 20 per cent of the disease burden, but less than 10 per cent of NHS expenditure."

Although there has been increased investment in mental health services at a higher rate than the overall NHS budget, there is still a large gap between resources and demand. It is little wonder that all the talk of parity has seemed little more than warm words. I genuinely hope that under this Government things will finally change. I should point out that when we talk about waiting lists, those waiting in the mental health system are never included. Will my hon. Friend the Minister say something about that and explain how the Government plan to put parity of esteem into practice? Can he also say whether the Government will continue to increase investment in mental health services at a higher rate than the overall NHS budget during this Parliament?

Lord Darzi's recent report states that around 3.6 million people are in contact with mental health services, and in April this year around 1 million people were waiting for mental health services. As he makes clear, it has become all too normal to have to wait a long time to access mental health services. The NHS's own data shows that in April this year, 10% of people who had been in contact with mental health services and were waiting for their second contact in adult community mental health services had been waiting for at least 116 weeks. All the evidence indicates that today we have a mental health system that is overstretched and under-resourced. In fact, there has never been so much demand for mental health support, with one in four people experiencing a diagnosable mental illness each year.

Figures from the British Medical Association indicate that last year there were a record 5 million referrals to mental health services in England. That is up by 33% on the number of referrals in 2019. The increase in the prevalence of depression over the last decade is a good example of how our mental health as a nation has got significantly worse. In 2012, the prevalence of depression was 5.8%. By 2022 that had more than doubled to 13.2%. In my own constituency of Ashford the figure was even higher, at 17%.

Given the increased prevalence of mental health issues, I was pleased that in the first King's Speech of this Labour Government we saw mention of legislation to modernise the Mental Health Act 1983. The proposed legislation has been welcomed across the sector. It is an important opportunity to improve care and strengthen safeguards for people who are admitted to mental health hospitals. I hope the new Bill will address the fact that someone who is black or living in a deprived area is almost four times as likely to be sectioned under the Act.



[Sojan Joseph]

Will my hon. Friend the Minister tell me when we can expect to see the Government's legislation introduced in Parliament? As Lord Darzi identified in his report, the lack of capital investment in places where people are sectioned means that a lot of those places are unsuitable, outdated and unsafe. From my own experience, I know that nurses, managers and matrons spend a lot of time trying to get capital works done in an NHS trust.

People living with a long-term physical condition are 50% more likely to suffer from mental ill health, while those with Parkinson's disease are twice as likely to be at risk of suicide. That underlines the importance of a wholesale change so that support can be accessed at an early stage. Too often, people can access support only after they have ended up in crisis. NHS figures show that in July there were just over 40,000 new urgent, very urgent or emergency referrals to crisis care teams. At that point, the treatment that patients receive is not only more intensive for them, but more costly for the NHS.

The difficulty of accessing mental health services explains why increased numbers of people who require support end up being admitted to accident and emergency departments. To illustrate that, I will use the example of my own integrated care board in Kent and Medway, which has recently launched several safe havens to provide support for anyone in a mental health crisis. They have helped to reduce the number of people who seek support by going to hospital emergency departments when they experience a mental health crisis. In my constituency, there is not yet a safe haven. That may explain why William Harvey hospital in Ashford has one of the highest rates of individuals presenting with primary mental health needs at an A&E. I welcome plans that are under way for a safe haven at the hospital in the near future.

When patients end up in hospital, there are significant difficulties in getting them a bed. This is a challenge in Kent and Medway, but the picture is not dissimilar across the rest of England. The Royal College of Psychiatrists recommends a maximum occupancy rate of 85% of beds for mental health patients. However, between April and June, the average occupancy rate of the 444 mental health beds in Kent and Medway was 91.7%. Across England, the average occupancy rate was 89.9%.

Then there is the issue of discharging patients. When they are clinically ready to leave hospital, there is often nowhere for them to go. That leaves them stuck in hospital, causing blockages in the system. In my own experience, nurses, doctors, managers, matrons and directors spend many working hours looking into moving people out of hospital, when they should be focusing on patient care. I believe that more appropriate housing must be built that is open for people leaving hospital. I urge the Department of Health and Social Care to work across Government to ensure that as the Government's planning reforms are introduced, that point is taken into consideration.

We have seen an increase in adults being treated in hospitals for their mental health, and the situation is the same for children and young people. A recent report from the Education Policy Institute shows that the number of young people admitted to hospital increased by one fifth between 2017 and 2023. As the report indicates, that suggests that more young people are reaching a crisis point and are experiencing multiple admissions. The evidence also indicates that a large number of

young people are not getting the necessary mental health support. A survey for Young Minds revealed that at least 60% of children considered to have a diagnosable mental health condition had not had contact with the NHS.

Research from the Maternal Mental Health Alliance published last week shows that more than 20% of women will face mental health challenges either during their pregnancy or in the perinatal period. It is clear from the research that many women struggle to access support, particularly those from racialised communities, young mothers and those experiencing domestic abuse or living in poverty.

We know that intervening early to ensure that people are kept in good health is not only better for the individual but tends to be far less costly. However, until now, efforts to prevent mental ill health have been severely underfunded and they have not been given the priority they deserve. I hope we will see a marked change in approach under this Government. With that in mind, I ask my hon. Friend the Minister whether greater priority will now be given to community-based support for mental health services. I hope he will agree that the easier it is for people to access mental health services locally, whether in a traditional health setting or through more informal drop-in services, the quicker they will be able to get the treatment they need.

Will my hon. Friend update us on the Government's plans for Young Futures hubs for children and young people? These open-access drop-in hubs will be an important step in providing community-based mental health support for children and young people. Will he say something about the roll-out of those hubs?

Our manifesto commitment to introduce a specialist mental health professional in every school will be important in helping to identify mental health conditions early on so that they can be prevented from developing into more serious conditions in later life. Will that include access to counselling? Research from the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy indicates that children whose mental health difficulties are initially too complex for lower intensity interventions but not complex enough to be referred to higher intensity interventions, such as child and adolescent mental health services, can easily miss out on the mental health support they need. They could instead be helped by forms of provision such as counselling.

All the evidence shows that being active helps people's mental health. Helping them back to work will also help to grow our economy. Lord Darzi's report identified that, since the pandemic, the number of people who are economically inactive has increased by around 800,000, with people with mental health conditions accounting for most of the increase. I welcome the Government's new initiative to work across Departments and create links between long-term unemployment and health. I also hope that they will look to reform the benefit system, ending the blame culture identified by the Secretary of State, so that we can treat people with mental health problems with dignity. I welcome the greater emphasis that Ministers have said will be put on prevention of illness, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will be able to reassure me that the same emphasis will also apply to mental health.

As the Mental Health Foundation has said, there is clear evidence that place and the circumstances in which people are born, grow, study, live and work have a

powerful influence on their mental health. Therefore, there must be a fundamental reform of the way in which we deal with mental health. We should be addressing the complexity of interactions and relationships, and how they affect individuals, families and communities. Rather than starting from the point of treating mental health, we should put the emphasis on creating a society that prevents mental ill health in the first place.

Beginning with central Government, I want to see a co-ordinated approach to developing effective policies to protect people's mental health. With that in mind, the priority that this Government have already given to cutting pollution and building high-quality houses is welcome. I also welcome the proposed pre-watershed junk food ban and the steps that Ministers are taking to create a smokefree society. Going forward, I want to see greater cross-Government working to address the social determinants of our mental health.

In the coming months, the Government are set to publish their 10-year plan for the NHS. As my hon. Friend the Minister and his colleagues work on that, I hope that they will consult with campaigners and organisations working in mental health, as well as representatives of the workforce. By doing that, the Government will be able to grasp the opportunity to transform the way we approach the issue of mental health, ensure that there is true parity of esteem and provide real, meaningful change in the mental health system.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** Order. This is clearly a popular subject. Lots of people had indicated previously that they wished to speak; there are obviously people who wish to speak who had not indicated beforehand, and others will want to intervene. The Minister and Opposition spokespersons have 10 minutes each. Having done the calculations, we will regrettably introduce a formal three-minute time limit on Back Benchers. You will be able to see the time on the screen, and regrettably I will have to cut you off in your prime if you go over three minutes. Just bear that in mind, please. I am sorry for the tutorial, but it is worth having, I suppose. Please bob if you do want to speak.

1.48 pm

**Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD):** It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd, as I speak for the first time in Westminster Hall. I thank the hon. Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) for securing this important and timely debate on World Mental Health Day, and for speaking so well.

Mental health can affect any of us at any time, young or old. Unfortunately, too many people simply do not get the support they need and some go on to take their own life. Speaking personally, husbands of two friends of mine, a friend's brother and a friend have taken their life, destroying families who are left behind figuring out how to cope.

Since becoming the MP for Epsom and Ewell, I have been shocked by the lack of mental health support, but also amazed at the ingenuity of local residents to provide it in its absence. I had the pleasure of meeting Charley Moore the other day—a Surrey female firefighter and founder of an all-female support group in Epsom and Ewell called Grow and Glow. She had a mental health crisis last year and found it very difficult to access

support. She found many mental health groups for men, but she could not find any specifically for women, so she set one up.

I was also proud to meet two mental health charities the other day that were recognised at the BBC Surrey and Sussex Make a Difference Awards last week in my constituency. One was We Power On, which is a men's mental health "walk and talk" support group set up by Chris Waller after he and his friend reconnected during lockdown and discovered that they were both struggling with their mental health. He won the bravery award. He takes people out at the weekend, walking on the lovely Epsom downs and sharing their experiences.

The other charity, Joe's Buddy Line, was set up by Ivan Lyons, who won the community award and is one of my constituents. Ivan's son was an award-winning radio producer on Capital Radio. Sadly, in 2020, Joe took his own life. Through Joe's Buddy Line, Joe's family advocate for mental health to be treated equally and with the same seriousness as physical health. The charity provides mental health support, advice and resources for schools. It is encouraging schools to put a mental health policy in place in every single school, giving teachers the support that they need to support the young people of today. The charity has highlighted to me that currently it is not a statutory requirement for a school to have a mental health policy. Such a policy would foster a whole-school approach, so today I am calling for a statutory requirement for all schools to have a specific mental health policy.

Too many people are simply suffering and too many lives are being lost, yet some of that is preventable. Early intervention and prevention are absolutely key. First, to ensure that our young people get the support they need before they reach crisis point, we need to equip them with the tools they need to build resilience to cope with modern life. We must ensure that no one feels alone in their mental health journey, and we need to normalise conversations about how we are feeling mentally. I am absolutely proud that in my constituency, individuals such as Ivan, Chris and Charley are taking the initiative to champion mental health support for everyone and fill in the gaps that they have identified in the services. Let us not forget—

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** Order. Please sit down. May I reiterate that this is a very sensitive subject, and I do not want to have to stop people in mid-flow when they are talking? This is a very sensitive issue and it would sound rude, so I exhort hon. Members to keep to the three-minute limit. It is regrettable, as this is a very important subject, but please keep to the limit, because—I reiterate—this is such a sensitive subject, and I do not want to cut people off at a sensitive point.

1.52 pm

**Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) not only for securing this debate but for his tireless, dedicated work as a mental health nurse in the NHS. I thank him for his service. His analysis of the problems and solutions was masterful, and Parliament is all the stronger for having his expertise and experience in this place.

[Tony Vaughan]

The issue of mental health support is a policy challenge that goes beyond party political lines. Any civilised society is judged on how it treats its most vulnerable. The state of people's mental health in our nations is incredibly concerning. As a former trustee of South Kent Mind in my constituency of Folkestone and Hythe, I have seen a downward trajectory in people's mental health outcomes, particularly in deprived areas, and how mental health services are increasingly under strain. I also pay tribute to the incredible work done by South Kent Mind, which provides invaluable advice and well-run and well-attended classes, such as cookery and exercise classes, which provide local people with a sense of community, togetherness and support. Statistics from Mind have laid bare the reality. Each year, one in four people in England will experience a mental health problem of some kind, and one in six people report experiencing a common mental health problem, such as anxiety and depression. The number of people reporting self-harm went up by 62% between 2000 and 2014, and the number of people reporting suicidal thoughts in the past year went up by 30% between 2000 and 2014.

The mental health of people in this country is undoubtedly deteriorating, and we know that some groups are more likely than others to be impacted by mental health problems, such as the LGBTQIA+ community, black British people and women aged 16 to 24. There are several reasons behind the steep increase in suffering, such as the giant evils of inequality and austerity that have ripped the heart out of our communities. Unemployment and poor housing still plague people's mental health, just as they did in the age of the Victorian workhouse. There are in addition recent phenomena, such as the rise of social media, creating unprecedented pressures on young people to look a certain way, and the decline in physical health in our communities, especially in de-industrialised areas.

As a society we say that one suicide is too many, and that we want to remove the stigma around mental health. But as we know, the stigma festers in too many houses, homes, offices and sports clubs, particularly with men and boys, for whom talking about feelings or being seen to be vulnerable can be perceived as weak or embarrassing. I sense that I am out of time, so I will sit down.

1.55 pm

**Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Thank you, Mr Dowd, for allowing me to take off my neck brace to speak. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) on speaking so powerfully on this topic. I was a doctor before I came to this House, so for me the topic is important. There is a clear distinction when we debate this topic between mental wellbeing and mental health. Lockdown proved that everyone's mental wellbeing gets punished, but not everyone has a mental health issue. That is important when we are trying to segregate services: how do we supply the correct services to the people who need them the most?

I have spent the last five years in Parliament campaigning around body image and for a men's health Minister, particularly with regard to suicide. But I turn my attention to something close to my heart that is really important: the issue of adolescent mental health, because I am deeply concerned by the increase in children who are

suffering. It is not just things such as eating disorders; we are seeing attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, we are seeing anxiety and we are seeing autism.

I plead with the new Minister to think radically, in a positive way, when it comes to the NHS. In my area of Leicestershire, 40% of child and adolescent mental health services is taken up by dealing with ADHD and autism. That takes a lot of attention away from the kids who are self-harming, or have eating disorders or significant serious depression or psychosis. There is a radical solution: pull out education and health and pool those services as specialisms. That would build on the work that the last Conservative Government did on placing representatives and mental health workers in school, and would allow GPs and CAMHS the freedom to concentrate on what they need to deal with.

**John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): On that point, may I draw my hon. Friend's attention to the role of care co-ordinators with adolescents, and the problems and challenges of the transition to adult care? That moment can be critical in securing a pathway to an effective outcome. Often, the confusion over where responsibilities are delineated and begin has been a difficulty for my constituents.

**Dr Evans:** My hon. Friend is absolutely spot on. The cliff edges that exist in the NHS—and education and social services—cause a real problem, particularly for families, because at 18 someone does not just lose their diagnosis.

It is important to pool those areas because it allows us to stratify the way that we use our limited resources, and we know that health costs will continue to go up and spiral. I urge the Minister to have a think about potentially creating almost a national special educational needs and disabilities service, which would pool education and health experts together, releasing schools and relieving GPs' primary care and secondary care with specialists. Now we have the set-up of ICBs, there is scope to do that regionally across the 42 areas.

It is well worth thinking about pooling those resources together, because it would be possible to give specialist help; and as the hon. Member for Ashford said, identifying people early means that they will not end up in a crisis. That brings us back to preventive care, to identify those who are having problems with wellbeing or who have mental health issues. For me, that is the crux of what we need to do: how do we pool the resources in a way that is sustainable for the taxpayer and, most importantly, service users and providers—the children and adolescents, and the staff who have to cope with some of the most difficult problems? I leave the Minister with that thought.

1.59 pm

**Jack Abbott** (Ipswich) (Lab/Co-op): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) for securing this important debate on World Mental Health Day. Sitting in the Chamber are Members from every corner of the country and from all sides of the House—evidence that the mental health crisis is undeniably a national one.

My constituents in Ipswich, under the Norfolk and Suffolk mental health trust, suffer a particularly desperate service in an already broken system. Since its creation in 2012, the Norfolk and Suffolk foundation trust has



been—it arguably still is—the worst-performing mental health trust in the whole country. It was the first mental health trust to be put into special measures, in 2015, and it was then put into the NHS recovery support programme when the body was set up in 2021.

We are almost entirely accustomed to the slew of reports that find that the trust “requires improvement” or is “inadequate”, but time does not allow me to give a detailed overview of the litany of failures that have brought us to this point. However, there are two key tenets to the scandal. First, there is the scandal of the perhaps euphemistically named unexpected or avoidable deaths. The 2022 Care Quality Commission report found that there were 155 such deaths in the two years preceding the report, and the NSFT’s own “Learning from Deaths” report admitted to 418 unexpected unnatural deaths in a four-year period. Many of those deaths were entirely avoidable suicides, some while directly in the NSFT’s care. Those numbers, even taken at face value, which is unfortunately hard to do given the trust’s record, are emblematic of what my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) aptly called the “slow-motion disaster” of mental health care.

Secondly, there is the cruel detail of unrecorded or unaccounted deaths, which led to thousands of people falling through the gaps, left off official statistics and totted up retrospectively as if they were a mere glitch in the system—the dead dehumanised, lost and buried in spreadsheets. It is not right that, after facing allegations as serious as the NSFT has faced, it should be allowed to mark its on homework on the matter.

But with a new Government comes an opportunity for a new approach. I therefore ask the Minister to meet me to discuss a pathway to justice and to change Suffolk’s mental health services. This is the crux of the debate. The families who have suffered so much deserve justice, and all my constituents deserve change. Those two things are inseparable—we simply cannot have one without the other—and there is no time to waste in delivering them.

2.1 pm

**Mark Ferguson** (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd, in my first Westminster Hall contribution. I declare an interest: I was a former national officer for Unison, representing mental health workers and others. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) for securing this important debate, timely as it is on World Mental Health Day.

Improving support for mental health is one of the key recommendations of Lord Darzi’s report that the House discussed on Monday—a damning read, yet completely unsurprising to any patient who has engaged with the NHS in recent years. The surge in demand in respect of mental health needs in children and young people is not being met by community-based services, and Lord Darzi’s report found that after years of cuts the number of mental health nurses has only just returned to 2010 levels.

Indeed, the Department of Health and Social Care’s own dataset shows that in the year 2023-24 in my community of Gateshead, 1,745 children and young people aged between nought and 17 years of age were left waiting for first contact with child and adolescent mental health services, having waited at least six months

since referral—every single one an individual suffering and part of a family in my community being let down. At the same time, only 60 children and young people in Gateshead received that first contact within six months. Those figures reflect the trend across the country, with 109,000 children and young people under 18 waiting a year or more for first contact. That is why we need more support for children in their communities and schools, but without continuing to overstretch teachers. I welcome the Government’s commitment to roll out mental health councillors in every school and mental health hubs in the community, to cut through the backlog and ensure accessible support.

Lord Darzi’s report identifies a worrying normalisation of long waiting lists. I am in no doubt about the brilliant NHS staff in Gateshead, and elsewhere across our country, who work tirelessly day in, day out—something I know from personal experience. It is not the fault of mental health workers, nurses or GPs but, unfortunately, that of a decade of austerity and the top-down reorganisation of our NHS. To quote Laura Bunt, chief executive of the charity YoungMinds:

“Lord Darzi’s review confirms what we know already—that young people and their mental health have been severely let down by the system there to support them.”

It is our opportunity and responsibility to put that right.

2.4 pm

**Dr Lauren Sullivan** (Gravesham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) for securing this afternoon’s important debate.

As we know, one in four of us will deal with a mental health issue at some point in our lives. As is the case across the country, following the decade of under-investment that has just been referred to, my constituents in Gravesham are concerned about the difficulty of accessing the right support in good time, without waiting on waiting lists for years. We can all agree that mental health is just as important as physical health, and that the strain on the NHS at this moment in time is enormous. The system is very close to breaking point.

If the system is close to breaking, so are our young people. The lack of open access to universal provision was, I think, touched upon by the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans). It is about having a safe place to discuss mental wellbeing so that we prevent those people then needing further additional help.

In Gravesham, we are fortunate to have the Elliott Holmes Memorial Fund, a community interest company that aims to give direct access for counselling to young people in Gravesham. At the moment, there are no people on the waiting list, because they are being seen by dedicated counsellors. Based on national statistics, 1,200 young people in Gravesham between the ages of 13 and 19 are struggling with their mental health, but the fund has helped 271 young people since 2022.

I would like to place on the record my thanks to the fund for providing a space for young people’s issues to be heard. The fund was set up in memory of Elliott Holmes, who tragically took his own life in 2020 after suffering from mental illness for a number of years. After his passing, his family set up the fund to try to keep other young people from that path. I would like to thank them for that.

[Dr Lauren Sullivan]

I know that this Government are committed to addressing the mental health crisis that we are facing, and I am pleased to see that the King's Speech included specific mention of legislation, in the form of a mental health Bill. In particular, I would be pleased to hear what further things we can do to prevent this deepening, worsening crisis.

2.7 pm

**Shockat Adam** (Leicester South) (Ind): It is a privilege to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd.

I concur with everybody in thanking the hon. Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) for securing this vital debate. I want to touch on something he said about ethnic minorities. According to all the information we have, people from all ethnic minorities are detained under the Mental Health Act 1983 at much higher rates than any other people. Furthermore, they have the worst experiences and the worst outcomes. Would the Minister please look into the issue and see to it that our fantastic healthcare workers, whether they are in the education sector or in the health service, look into this vital issue, and are culturally sensitive when dealing with people from ethnic minorities?

2.8 pm

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Dowd. I think we all agree that, in introducing this debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) gave an incredible speech, as all contributors have.

I want to talk a little bit about the transitional approach that we are taking in York, following the Trieste model. It is seeing a real transition, in the way the Health Secretary has described, from secondary care, which we know is just not able to cope with the capacity and demand that is placed on it, into a more primary-care and socialised setting. It is really transformative for the people in my city.

We are setting up community mental health hubs in my city. We have one, and we are going to have two more to follow, with one working 24/7. The model is co-produced and multi-agency, and is moving to provide open-access support to help people to manage their own mental health challenges, with interventions from health professionals, social prescribing and peer support, and to look at issues around welfare, debt and employment support.

Particularly in respect of community outreach, the hub is taking people who feel so neglected, because there just is not the capacity, into a space where they can get support and then progress on with their lives. It is centred around a café where people are encouraged to engage and talk. The café is run by service users, so it is a wholly-owned model, and it is incredibly successful.

The Trieste model is considered one of the best models of service provision in the world because of its emphasis on integration with the whole community and with the self, with professional support at hand if needed. In Trieste, very few depend on secondary care or acute psychiatric care, and residential placements are few and far between. We need to look at that, particularly in respect of the transitions and the Government's ambition. Following a social model means we do not

pathologise mental health but deal with it and help people to build on their strengths and to build resilience into the future.

Our programme is linked with the local university, York St John University, which runs the Converge programme that enables people to use education not only as a way to deal with their mental health issues but to learn new skills and feel included in our community. It contrasts so much with the traditional model, which we know just is not functioning given the demand on services. I therefore urge the Minister to have a look at what is happening in Trieste and to come and have a look at what is happening in York. Let us put this into a model in which people live with mental health as opposed to struggling with it.

2.11 pm

**Helena Dollimore** (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) for securing this important debate on such an important issue. I speak for many when I say that we are lucky to have his experience in the House; he has such expertise in mental health. We are all here because for too long mental health has not been given the same focus as physical health. It has not been given the same funding or the right focus, and there has been far too much stigma in talking about it.

In my Hastings and Rye constituency, too many children and young people are waiting far too long for mental health support. That is why I am really pleased to see this Labour Government's focus on children's mental health and cutting NHS waiting lists, putting more mental health specialists into schools in particular, and hiring 8,500 mental health specialists into our NHS to cut waiting lists.

I recently attended a memorial for Phoebe, who sadly took her own life in Hastings this July. Phoebe was aged just 14. She had been on a child and adolescent mental health services waiting list since January, and she never got the support she needed. She never got that appointment with CAMHS. Her mum Tamzin and her whole family are now showing amazing courage and amazing strength in channelling this tragedy and their grief into campaigning to make sure that this never happens to any child again, and that we get more focus on children and young people's mental health.

I thank all the charities that are working on this issue in all our constituencies, and I thank all the mental health workers who work so hard to provide the support that is needed. In my Hastings and Rye constituency, Eggtooth is a local mental health charity that provides vital support and early intervention for around 250 children in Hastings and Rother a year. I have been contacted by many parents and healthcare professionals who are extremely concerned to hear that the funding for Eggtooth is now under threat from the local NHS integrated care board.

**Mark Ferguson:** Does my hon. Friend agree that charities in her constituency, in mine and in so many others provide the valuable resource that helps us to deal with the crisis in CAMHS?

**Helena Dollimore:** Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend for that important point recognising the important contribution that so many charities and staff make.

I am extremely concerned to hear that Eggtooth's funding is now at risk and I wish to share with Members some of the views of local healthcare professionals about the importance of the service. A local doctor says:

"The withdrawal of Eggtooth from children's mental health services in Sussex would leave a profound gap in support for vulnerable young people."

A local paediatric nurse says:

"I have stories to tell which I cannot share where children and young people have been helped...I worked in acute emergency settings and safeguarding previously and often saw the outcomes of no intervention."

That nurse makes a vital point about the importance of early intervention, as have many Members. We know that to intervene early is better for the young person, and we know it will cost the taxpayer less. To give an example, the support that Eggtooth provides costs around £520 per child. By contrast, a CAMHS referral costs almost £2,500, and an A&E intervention, should that be needed, costs even more. I urge the integrated care board to reconsider the decision.

I strongly welcome the Labour Government's commitment to cut NHS waiting lists, cut mental health waiting lists and focus on early intervention, particularly in schools, where we need it the most. It is on all of us in this House to keep alive the memory of Phoebe and that of all those who have lost their lives to suicide.

2.15 pm

**Tristan Osborne** (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank the many Members from across the Chamber for their contributions, and I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore), who spoke about one of her constituents, Phoebe. This year's World Mental Health Day theme is about the link between safe and healthy workplaces and safeguarding mental wellbeing, while unhealthy environments marked by stigma and harassment can harm it. Poor mental health not only affects individuals and their families but leads to reduced performance, absenteeism and high turnover rates. I therefore welcome the global campaign to challenge absenteeism and the impact of mental health. Across the world, 12 billion days are lost annually to these issues, costing the global economy \$1 trillion.

In my area, NHS Digital data and the House of Commons Library show that mental health provision is not sufficient. We see an increasing reliance on primary care services and an inability of secondary care services to deal with the increased pressures. Across the three key areas linked to diagnosis of depression, 17.3% of residents above the age of 60 in my constituency in Kent now have a diagnosis. Dementia is a rising challenge, with 24,000 people in Kent and Medway and nearly 1 million people in the UK experiencing it. As my colleagues have said, there are also concerns around mental health provision for young people, with 13,000 children and 14,000 adults waiting for neurodivergent condition tests, and ADHD and autism CAMHS referrals rising by some 600%.

I welcome the Government's commitment to mental health, both in the Darzi report and in updating the Mental Health Act 1983. Within that, will the Minister review how we invest in mental health care and infrastructure alongside the Darzi report, with the mental

health investment standard for capital spending, and will he urgently reflect on how we effectively give hospitals extra support with other standards? Will he also consider how we can improve patient flow in hospital services, with support for initiatives such as Right Care, Right Person, which has been adopted by Kent police; specific and targeted mental health-related discharge packages with support and home care; and an expansion of psychological therapies for those with severe mental illness?

Lastly, I welcome the intervention in schools with an increased provision of specialist mental health support. Can we also look at utilising other approaches to reduce waiting times for CAMHS, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye mentioned, and to reduce the stress on parents of navigating a special educational needs system that is not fit for purpose? The Government have made the necessary and correct interventions to improve our health services, but a long journey remains ahead.

2.18 pm

**Dr Simon Opher** (Stroud) (Lab): On World Mental Health Day, I am wearing this slightly ghastly yellow tie. May I also do a little promotion? In room M in Portcullis House at 3 o'clock, at the end of the debate, we have some young people, through YoungMinds, telling us what they think of the service. It is really important, particularly with young people, to make sure that we develop services that they want and that we do not dictate.

I am still a practising GP in Stroud. More than 90% of mental health consultations take place in primary care and more than 40% of GP consultations concern mental health. I am sure the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) will concur with me on that front. I would like to divide mental health into two sections. There is serious mental illness, which is serious and enduring, affecting about 130,000 people in this country. I will make a little plug: they tend to die 10 to 20 years earlier than other people and we must promote their physical health.

The other area is anxiety and depression. We have 8 million people in this country on antidepressants—selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors—and at least 2 million of them are trying to get off. We need to ensure we do not over-medicalise mental health. I was pleased to hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford said about mental wellbeing and mental health. We all get a bit pissed off sometimes—that is normal for humans—and it is extremely important that we do not conflate that with mental ill health.

**John Glen:** May I just say how much I agree with that remark? We may disagree about resourcing and what has happened over the past 14 years, but we need the confidence to talk about building resilience and prevention so that people do not get to the point where they need medical intervention. We have the responsibility to talk about that in this place and in our communities so that we get to the root causes, which are not always to do with socioeconomic matters.

**Dr Opher:** Absolutely; I fully agree with that.

I want to make a couple of comments about the state of mental health services, for which there are extraordinary waits: a patient of mine had to wait six months following a suicide attempt. That is simply not good enough.



[Dr Opher]

In Stroud, we have to wait four years for neurodiversity assessments because we do not have enough resource. In my opinion, we need to move the resource into the community.

I also support what my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford said about health and education. We need mental health support teams in our schools, and we must spread SEND provision evenly.

The Under-Secretary of State for Public Health and Prevention is with us, so I want to talk about the prevention of mental health issues. There is quite a lot of evidence about promoting maternal and infant mental health, and also about parenting and bullying at school. Using arts and culture is an incredibly strong way of improving mental health.

I was impressed with what my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) said about the community basis of mental health treatment. For many lower-level conditions, there is no need for consultant-led care. Support that takes place in the community costs much less and can be really effective.

The CAMHS waiting list is appalling, and we have a crisis with SEND and delays with education, health and care plans. We do not have enough educational psychologists either. I want to stress what my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford said about care co-ordinators. Young people's social prescribers are very effective and tend to de-medicalise things that can be supported in the community.

I am really impressed that we are going to get 8,500 more mental health workers. I am also impressed by what they will be doing in schools. We need to improve the physical health of people with serious mental illness, reduce the number of SSRI antidepressant medications, and promote social prescribing, the arts and community care in our mental health services.

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** Can I just remind Members about modes of expression? I will be diplomatic about it.

2.23 pm

**Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab):** I rise to speak about this issue on World Mental Health Day. I have championed it many times across my career and I will continue to do so in my time in this place.

My constituents—and, I am sure, those of all hon. Members—want something that we used to take for granted: a happy, decent life, with a better future for their children. For too many in Darlington, that is not the reality, and I believe that the current mental health crisis is a product of our times. I will focus my brief contribution not on those with severe mental illness, who are often in crisis, but on those who are struggling with day-to-day poor mental health.

I agree with the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), who advocated a cross-departmental approach. Poor mental health is pushing people out of work, and that is a huge issue for the Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions. A lack of child mental health support and a failure to tackle the online safety crisis for children is leading to school refusals, which is an issue not only for the Department for Education but for the economy and for future generations. Loneliness is impacting the physical health of our older people, which is an issue for the NHS. The lack of

opportunity, quality work, maternal mental health services, veteran support and childcare support is driving people in my constituency to despair.

I have mentioned this before, but I will mention it again on this day: within my own network, I have lost seven men to suicide. Only one of them had a severe mental illness. In my region, we have the highest rate of male suicide and the lowest wages. I ask that we, as a Government who are committed to equality of opportunity for our regions, consider my constituency and my region for a cross-departmental pilot to tackle poor mental health before we lose any more people to avoidable deaths.

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** I now come to the Opposition spokespersons.

2.25 pm

**Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD):** Thank you, Mr Dowd, for calling me to speak.

As a veterinary surgeon, I come from a profession that has a suicide rate four times the national average. Like many people in this Chamber, I have experienced the pain of losing friends and colleagues to suicide. That led me to become a trustee of a mental health charity for several years, and I am honoured to be the spokesperson on mental health for the Liberal Democrats.

Although we have undoubtedly focused on NHS clinical services in this debate, we often underestimate the profound impact that non-medical issues, such as living in poverty, financial worries, debt and insecure housing, can have on mental health and how they can hinder people's recovery from a mental health crisis.

I am incredibly proud of a project that I visited just last week in my constituency of Winchester that is run by Melbury Lodge mental health hospital and the citizens advice bureau in Westminster. This project provides one-to-one advice and support to in-patients on matters relating to living in the community, from relationship and financial advice to management of debt and benefits and housing problems. Someone who ends up being admitted to a mental health unit will find that their post—correspondence relating to their benefits, mortgages and other bills—all goes to their home address, and if nobody else lives there, they will not receive any of it. When they are discharged, they may get out and find that there is a problem with their benefits, or that they have received a huge bill that they were not expecting.

Amazingly, the Melbury Lodge and Citizens Advice team have demonstrated that for every £1 spent on this project, the NHS system avoids spending on average £14.06, which is a huge return on investment. As we extrapolate out, the research shows that having the Citizens Advice service on site means that Melbury Lodge has avoided spending nearly a quarter of a million pounds. This cost avoidance is achieved through shorter in-patient stays, fewer readmissions, reduced medication and better engagement with community services. That is a staggering amount of money that can now be spent directly on clinical care. I urge the Government to look at the results of this initiative with a view to rolling it out in other parts of the country, because it is good for patients, good for NHS staff and good for the taxpayer. I am really excited that this project has been shortlisted for an NHS parliamentary award next week, and I look forward to supporting the team in person.

We need to acknowledge the impact that the lack of mental healthcare has on other public services. When I go out with the police in Winchester, they tell me that they spend between 40% and 50% of their time dealing with mental health issues in some capacity.

The hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) mentioned the cost when people in a mental health crisis, who are often already on a mental health waiting list, arrive at accident and emergency departments. One of the biggest issues raised with me by parents in Winchester is the huge delay for children who are waiting for diagnoses of ADHD and autism.

The hon. Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) has already mentioned that the Darzi report acknowledged that 20% of the NHS disease burden is due to mental health issues.

**Lola McEvoy:** Does the hon. Member agree that too often people confuse neurodiversity, which we should celebrate; severe mental illness, which we need to support people with and help them manage; and poor mental health, which is a day-to-day thing that can often be caused by circumstances?

**Dr Chambers:** That is a good and important point. We also need to acknowledge that people with certain issues—neurodiversity, undiagnosed ADHD or autism—who do not get the support they need are more likely to develop mental health issues as a result. It is a bit of a chicken-and-egg-situation.

Finally, as I was saying, only 10% of the NHS budget is for mental health, but it is 20% of the disease burden. The obvious question people ask is: how do we afford that? When I look at the pressure on the police, A&E and the education system, the question I would ask is: how can we afford not to treat mental health properly?

2.30 pm

**Dr Ben Spencer** (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I start by declaring that I am a former consultant psychiatrist and that a family member is a consultant psychiatrist.

Listening to this debate has been a mixed experience. It has been great to hear the wealth of talent and expertise that we have in the House, but at times it has been harrowing to hear people speak about their personal experiences or those of their constituents. That is a reminder to us all of just how substantial the impact of mental illness can be on people—our families and friends. The tone in which this very sensitive debate has been conducted is fantastic.

I thank the hon. Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) for bringing forward this debate, for the wealth of experience—22 years—that he brings to this place, and for a very balanced speech in which he acknowledged the catchment investments under the previous Government and raised the importance of waiting lists. When I was first elected, I brought up targets for mental health in a private Member's Bill, which did not end up going anywhere, on waiting times for getting an in-patient bed when one is requested for somebody with a mental disorder. Of course, we all want improvements in mental health care and treatment, and there need to be improvements in mental health care and treatment. I am sure there will be no disagreement across the House about that.

The hon. Member for Ashford was absolutely spot on to mention housing, work and benefits. It is a testament to his experiences in psychiatric nursing that he went on to mention the surrounding holistic care. One of the challenges of debates on improving mental health services is that we must acknowledge that that involves many other areas of public policy, public provision and cultural factors, and try to broaden that as much as possible.

**Dr Evans:** The former Member for Doncaster, who is now sadly not in this House, was a significant champion for men's and boys' health—suicide in particular, which has been mentioned here, is such a problem. My hon. Friend stated the case for mental health being a pan-Government policy area—does he believe that strengthens the argument for having a Minister for men and boys to go across Government and think about all these issues, especially as suicide is the leading cause of death for young men under the age of 45?

**Dr Spencer:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out that, sadly, suicide is the No.1 cause of death among young men. My understanding, although the stats change all the time, is that below the age of 45, suicide is the No.1 cause of death among both men and women. It is absolutely right that we look at sex-specific approaches to intervention. Factors affecting health in men will be different from factors affecting health in women.

I want to go back to the social elements of mental health care, which the hon. Member for Ashford mentioned, and a smoke-free society and banning tobacco. Certainly when I was practising, 50% of tobacco was consumed by people with a severe mental illness. That raises a whole host of concerns and issues about what is happening with tobacco consumption and people with a mental disorder.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) was absolutely right, given his experience, about something he has mentioned many times in the House: the importance of delineating mental wellbeing and mental illness. I tend to think about it in this way: we all have mental health, but we need to separate mental wellbeing from mental illness. The two are different and need different approaches, as was echoed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) and the new hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher), who gave rise to a very fertile discussion on his views on the area. The hon. Member for Leicester South (Shokat Adam), who is no longer in his place, rightly pointed out inequalities in detention and outcomes for those from minority ethnic backgrounds. That is a very important issue.

That brings me on to our record in Government over the past 14 years; there are a few things I want to pick out. One is that we set parity of esteem in law through the Health and Social Care Act 2012, which was a big step forward. We still need parity of esteem in outcomes, but nevertheless that was a very important step. We expanded access to psychological therapies and I am particularly pleased by the expansion of individual placement and support, which has been shown to help people get into work, particularly those with a chronic and enduring mental illness. We have seen more people take up maternity care, and we also invested in the mental health estate.

[Dr Ben Spencer]

In fact, in my own constituency, we have a new mental health hospital. The Abraham Cowley Unit is being rebuilt, which will provide world-class care for people living in my patch. Perhaps most important of all, given the conversation that we have had today, is the decrease in in-patient and out-patient suicide that we have seen over the years. Of course, I recognise that there are a variety of factors driving that but we should be pleased that things are moving in the right direction on suicides, although there is more to be done.

Today is World Mental Health day and it is a very broad topic, but in my time I would like to focus specifically on one area that, as it certainly was in my former career, is often neglected—psychosis. It particularly affects people suffering from schizophrenia or bipolar affective disorder. It can be a very disabling illness and has been responsible for quite a degree of disability and health concern in the UK. Often debates such as these, and debates in the media, do not focus on psychosis and I think a big part of that comes from the stigma attached to it. People who work in the sector, and those with expertise here, will know that it is an area of great need both in terms of community mental health teams and in-patient settings. The hon. Member for Stroud was absolutely right and I am glad he pointed this out: the 10 to 15 years of life lost following a diagnosis of psychosis is something that we have to fix.

I believe that we also need to improve access to treatments such as clozapine, which is an excellent treatment for schizophrenia. I am pleased to have previously worked with Clozapine Support Group UK in its campaign to try to get more access to clozapine for people for whom it is indicated. We have also seen the reform of the Mental Health Act 1983, which the former Prime Minister Theresa May kicked off with the Wessely review. I was part of the working groups on the Wessely review, particularly looking at helping with the tribunal system, and I was on the pre-legislative scrutiny committee as well. How we look after people detained for treatment in the absence of consent is very important, and I am pleased that this Government have committed to take forward the work on reviewing that Act.

I thank everyone who works in the care and treatment of people with mental illness. As we have heard today, that is a very broad sector; it is not only people who work in the NHS but those who work in the third sector in a variety of organisations and institutions. That is very important work.

**Lee Pitcher** (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Will the hon. Member give way?

**Dr Spencer:** Very briefly—I have only a couple of minutes left.

**Lee Pitcher:** My cousin died from suicide two years ago. We have talked about a lot of facts and figures today, and we have talked a bit about heart, but I can absolutely tell the hon. Member that a family never recovers from that. My auntie and uncle will never recover from the fact that they lost their child before they themselves went.

All a person can do in that situation is put their energy into something positive, and that is about how to help people going forwards. One of the big things is

absolutely those charities that support people, such as the Jackson Hope Foundation. I have gone along and spoken there myself even this last Friday, and I talked about some of my experiences in Parliament really openly and freely. It is a safe place. There are 16 men there talking unbelievably openly about how they feel, and it makes such a difference. I want to ensure that going forwards, whatever we do, learning from those groups feeds into our plans and strategies because it makes all the difference to people.

**Dr Spencer:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for sharing something so personal in his intervention, and for sharing his experience of the impact of suicide. Many Members have shared personal experience in this debate. That is very important.

I am mindful that there will be people in the Gallery or watching at home who may be affected by the topics we are discussing, and I take a moment to point out that there are a variety of services to help people in their recovery, if one can call it that, after a loved one has tragically died from suicide, or to help people who are in crisis, such as local crisis services, the Samaritans or Mind. There is a variety of third sector and charity helplines that can help. Men's Sheds is one organisation I know of that is very helpful. I am really pleased that the hon. Gentleman raised this issue.

I will finish with a few questions for the Minister. The Government do not have a mental health care and treatment strategy or a psychosis strategy and, following an answer to a written parliamentary question I tabled, I understand that there are no plans for a mental ill health strategy to be brought in. Given today's debate, I wonder whether the Minister will reconsider that position. What are the Government's plans on taking forward our suicide prevention strategy, or a specific psychosis or mental ill health strategy—however he wants to cut the cloth?

Secondly, when does he expect the Mental Health Bill to have its First Reading in this place? All Members are going to want to extensively debate and scrutinise that Bill. When does he expect it to come forward? What is his appraisal of the challenges that the Bill needs to answer when it comes to the interaction between the Mental Health Act 1983 and the Mental Capacity Act 2005 and the deprivation of liberty safeguards? What about the MM case on deprivation of liberty in the context of a restricted patient in the community, and the interaction with the Children's Act 1989 on when children can choose a nominated representative? I realise he may not have the answers to that immediately, but I would be grateful if he could write to me. Community mental health teams are the core of psychiatric teams in the community and our psychiatric care and treatment service. What is his plan to support them?

Finally, what is his appraisal of integrated care systems and their commissioning of mental health services? The hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) mentioned the challenges with her ICS. What is the Minister's appraisal of that commissioning and how integrated care systems can be held to account to make sure that is being delivered?

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** I want to give the sponsor an opportunity to wind up at the end. I call the Minister.



2.43 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd, and it is also a pleasure to respond to this debate on World Mental Health Day. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) for securing the debate and for drawing on his long-standing experience of working in mental health care to raise so many important points in the debate. As several others have, including the shadow Minister, I thank everybody who works in the field of mental health, whether as a mental health practitioner or as one of the very many volunteers who give up their time freely to help people who are facing particular difficulties in their lives.

I am responding to this debate on behalf of Baroness Merron, the Minister with responsibility for mental health, so apologies if I do not answer everybody's questions. I have taken copious notes and am sure that the powers that be sitting behind me have taken even more. If I do not answer all the points raised, Members can expect to receive something from the relevant Minister in due course.

It has been a great debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) and the hon. Members for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) and for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans). The latter made a really important point about the interrelationship between education and health in the whole sphere of special educational needs, autism and so on. I reassure him and others who made that point that the beauty of being part of a mission-led Government that has five missions—one is the health mission and another is the opportunities mission—is that it allows Ministers the opportunity to look at things in the round and break out of departmental silos. I assure him that on these issues I am having bilateral meetings with counterparts in the Department for Education about how we drive forward key elements of the health mission, and also about the role that the Department of Health and Social Care can play in achieving the Government's opportunities mission. That work is taking place at departmental level.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead Central and Whickham (Mark Ferguson) for his contribution, and the hon. Member for Leicester South (Shokat Adam), who is not in his place but made some really important points, particularly about the impact of the Mental Health Act on black and minority ethnic groups. I, and the Government, think it is shameful that under the existing Mental Health Act black people are three and a half times more likely to be detained than white people and eight times more likely to be placed on a community treatment order. Our mental health Bill will give patients greater choice and autonomy and enhanced rights and support, and we will ensure that it is designed to be respectful in terms of treatment with the aim of eradicating inequalities. I put that on the record because the hon. Member for Leicester South made an important point.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Gravesend (Dr Sullivan) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell). My hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) made a powerful contribution about Phoebe and about her ICB—I hope the ICB has listened. My hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne) made a contribution, as did my hon.

Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher). I reiterate to him that of course the arts have a powerful role to play in the health and wellbeing of the individual. I was fortunate last Friday to see the Manchester Camerata, one of the great orchestras in my home city, at the Gorton Monastery in my constituency, which is now a health and wellbeing hub. As well as understanding the work that it does, I also learned a lot more about social prescribing and about its powerful listening service.

**Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab):** As an NHS physiotherapist working in Dudley, I know very well that mental health is multifaceted. It affects not just one part of a person's life, but everything: sleep deprivation, diet, overeating, undereating and building relationships. Does the Minister agree that we need more care in the community, including first contact practitioners, social prescribers and councillors in the community as the first line of treatment?

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. At the heart of the health mission that the Labour Government want to see is the shift from hospital to community, from analogue to digital and from sickness to prevention. What we do in the community really matters. Our ambition for the future of mental health services is wrapped up in those shifts, particularly the shift from hospital to community.

**John Glen:** Could I share my experience as a Minister? When we looked at social prescribing when I was in the Treasury, it was always difficult to establish an evidence base to justify the allocation of resources. I urge the Minister to continue that battle to make the case, because I am sure that the instinct of all Members throughout the House is that there is something in that ambition, and we must find a way of unlocking it so that we can get social prescription out into the community where a variety of provision is available.

**Andrew Gwynne:** The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. That will be one of the big challenges with the prevention agenda more generally, because often the investment we have to make today does not pay dividends immediately and there is a bit of a punt. Having been a Treasury Minister, he will know the challenges that that can present to the Treasury orthodoxy, but we have to push on this agenda.

I always say that being an MP and a GP is only one letter apart. We are often dealing with the same people who present with the same problems but from a different angle. We go away as Members of Parliament trying to fix the issue as they have presented it to us, and the GP will write a prescription and send them off having sorted out the issue as it was presented to them. However, the beauty of social prescribing is that there is an opportunity to deal with the whole issue in the round. The argument has been won with almost everybody, and any tips from the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) so we can get this over the line with the Treasury will be welcome.

I should mention my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy), and welcome the hon. Members for Winchester (Dr Chambers) and for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) to their Front-Bench positions.

In the minutes I have left, I want to say to the House that many of the issues raised by Members during the debate are symptomatic of a struggling NHS. If we look

[Andrew Gwynne]

at the figures, the challenges facing the NHS are sobering. In 2023, one in five children and young people aged eight to 25 had a mental health problem, which is a rise from one in eight in 2017. The covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated need, with analysis showing that 1.5 million children and young people under the age of 18 could need new or increased mental health support following the pandemic.

**Dr Luke Evans:** I want to raise an issue as the Minister is the Minister responsible for prevention. One of the biggest and most shocking things we saw during the pandemic was the increase in eating disorders, which is a very difficult topic for any Government around the world to try to break down. We know that the impact of eating disorders lives with people for the rest of their life and can cause them to lose their life, so will the Minister ensure that they are looked at as a priority? There was previously a roundtable; will he look into doing something similar again to bring experts together?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I am reluctant to commit Ministers to roundtables when I am covering another portfolio, because then they will do the same when they cover me in Westminster Hall debates, but I will say that we take this agenda incredibly seriously. When we were in opposition we gave support to the then Government, and I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will do everything we can to support people who have eating disorders and to get the right provision and support at the right time to the people who need it.

As I was saying, the covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the need for mental health support. Around 345,000 children and young people were on a mental health waiting list at the end of July this year, with more than 10% of them having waited for more than two years. Some groups of children and young people are disproportionately impacted by mental health problems largely driven by a complex interplay of social and environmental determinants of poor mental health, as we heard in the debate.

We are committed to reforming the NHS to ensure that we give mental health the same attention and focus as physical health. It is unacceptable that too many children, young people and adults do not receive the mental health-care that they need, and we know that waits for mental health services are far too long. We are determined to change that, which is why we will recruit 8,500 additional mental health workers across child and adolescent mental health services. We will also introduce a specialist mental health professional in every school and roll out Young Futures hubs. We are working with our colleagues at NHS England and in the Department for Education as we plan the delivery of those commitments.

Early intervention on mental health issues is vital if we want to prevent young people from reaching crisis point. Schools and colleges play an important role in early support, which is why we have committed to providing a mental health professional in every school. However, it is not enough to provide access to a mental health professional when young people are struggling; we want the education system to set young people up to thrive, and we know that schools and colleges can have a profound impact on the promotion of good mental health and wellbeing. Doing this will require a holistic approach, drawing in many aspects of the school or college's provision. I know there are many schools that already do this work,

and my Department is working alongside the DFE to understand how we can support best practice across the sector.

As I have said, our manifesto commits us to rolling out Young Futures hubs. This national network will bring local services together and deliver support for teenagers who are at risk of being drawn into crime or who face mental health challenges. The hubs will provide open-access mental health support for children and young people in every community.

On other aspects of our plans, the mental health Bill announced in the King's Speech will deliver the Government's manifesto commitment to modernise the Mental Health Act 1983. It will give patients greater choice, autonomy, enhanced rights and support, and it will ensure that everyone is treated with dignity and respect throughout their medical treatment. It is important that we get the balance right to ensure that people receive the support and treatment they need when necessary for their own protection and that of others. The Bill will make the Mental Health Act 1983 fit for the 21st century, redressing the balance of power from the system to the patient and ensuring that people with the most severe mental health conditions get better and more personalised care. It will also limit the scope to detain people with a learning disability and autistic people under the 1983 Act.

Finally, Lord Darzi's report identified circumstances in which mental health patients are being accommodated in Victorian-era cells that are infested with vermin, with 17 men sharing two showers. We will ensure that everyone is treated with dignity and respect throughout their treatment in a mental health hospital, and we will fix the broken system to ensure that we give mental health the same attention as physical health.

If I have not answered Members' questions, those Members will be written to by the relevant Minister. I again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford on securing the debate.

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** I call Sojan Joseph to wind up very briefly.

2.58 pm

**Sojan Joseph:** I thank the Minister for his brief answer, and I thank the shadow Minister and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for their responses to the debate. I also thank the other Members who took time out of their busy schedule to be here.

I thank all the organisations that contacted me in advance of the debate. There are too many to mention them all, but they include the Education Policy Institute, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, the Royal College of Psychiatrists, the Royal College of Nurses, the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, the Maternal Mental Health Alliance, YoungMinds, the King's Fund and, finally, Flourish, which is based in my Ashford constituency. I hope that the Department of Health and Social Care will actively engage with these organisations from across the sector to draw on their knowledge and experience.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered improving support for mental health.

## Gaza and Humanitarian Aid

3.1 pm

**Ayoub Khan** (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I beg to move,

That this House has considered humanitarian aid and Gaza.

I thank everybody for attending this very important debate. I begin by paying tribute to the humanitarian aid workers in Gaza, who continue their lifesaving efforts and face impossible odds. Despite having every reason to lose hope, they remain steadfast in their mission to provide aid, and are the only source of survival and hope for the people of Gaza. Sadly, at least 289 of those brave individuals have been killed. I trust that Members present will join me in honouring each and every one of them.

The horrors facing the people of Gaza are overwhelming, reflecting Israel's efforts to strip away their humanity. Since the attack on 7 October, the collective punishment inflicted on Gaza has been shocking. Ninety per cent. of the population has been displaced, being moved from pillar to post, and 96% face acute food insecurity. There have been over 42,000 deaths in the past year, although that number does not include the thousands of bodies still buried under the rubble of destroyed buildings: loved ones who will never be recovered.

This debate is not about the Israelis' military onslaught of Palestinian civilians in Gaza; it is about those being killed not by weapons, but by the lack of basic humanitarian assistance. Israel has weaponised the denial of aid, pushing the remaining Palestinians to the brink of death. The health crisis in Gaza is devastating. Since 7 October, at least 10 children per day have limbs amputated, many without anaesthesia. Over half a million of the population suffer from diseases such as jaundice, caused by malnutrition and the unsanitary conditions they are forced to live in. That is the size of almost half of Birmingham's population.

Hospitals—the very places that could help—are in ruin; 31 of Gaza's 36 hospitals, and most United Nations healthcare stations, have been damaged or completely destroyed by Israeli airstrikes and ground operations. *The Lancet* estimates that the real death toll could be closer to 186,000, and with flood season approaching, the situation is set to get even worse.

It is not a case of shortage of aid, as we all know—we have all seen the thousands of trucks lined up on the border. This is a deliberate act. Israeli authorities are intentionally limiting the supply of vital aid. They have destroyed civilian infrastructure, such as schools, water stations, mosques and churches, and claimed military necessity. But the humanitarian workers on the ground tell a very different story. These are not military targets, yet the bombs keep falling and critical aid facilities are being obliterated.

Before 7 October, Gaza was receiving 508 aid trucks a day—just enough to keep the population afloat. Now the numbers stand at a mere 52 trucks, according to Oxfam aid workers.

**Iqbal Mohamed** (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): Throughout the past 12 months, the UK Government have failed to highlight or prevent the Israeli Government's denial of international assistance into Gaza and their clear breaches of international humanitarian law. The

UK has also failed to highlight the Israeli Government's not complying with International Court of Justice orders, which require them to facilitate the unimpeded access to Gaza of United Nations and other officials engaged in the provision of humanitarian aid. The UK is failing to stand up for international law as Israeli forces are forcibly transferring civilians as we speak—

**Valerie Vaz (in the Chair):** Order. This should be an intervention, not a speech, because many people are waiting to speak.

**Iqbal Mohamed:** Does my hon. Friend agree that the UK must act urgently to enforce UK Security Council resolutions?

**Ayoub Khan:** I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I think we are all singing off the same hymn sheet when it comes to what the UK should be doing.

Experts say that 2,000 trucks are required to address the current crisis, but only 52 are coming in at the moment. Aid convoys are being blocked not only at the checkpoints by Israeli soldiers; we have all witnessed some of the Israeli civilians blocking aid at crossings like Kerem Shalom and Nitzana. While the Israeli Army are competent to disperse thousands of protesters in Tel Aviv within minutes, they choose not to disperse the fewer than 100 protesters blocking life-saving aid. Even once they get through that blockade, they are shot at by IDF forces, either by snipers, drones or other military means.

We all know about the killings of the seven aid workers from the World Central Kitchen charity, which included three British aid workers. That was despite the Israeli Army being given co-ordinates and information about locations.

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman mentioned aid workers. Does he not agree that it is not just aid workers but those in the media, teachers, doctors and medical staff where we are seeing a discrediting and delegitimisation of the UN? He mentioned buildings, even the oldest church in Christendom. It feels like even within the rules of war, something has gone wrong here.

**Ayoub Khan:** Of course. The biggest problem we have is that journalists are not allowed in. One has to think about the reason why journalists are not being afforded the opportunity to report impartially—it is not happening. If the Israeli Government have nothing to hide, we would expect them to be welcoming journalists into the war zone. The risks are down to the journalists. However, we have seen this on an enormous scale. Journalists believe that they are being targeted specifically, so there is no reporting from within.

This is collective punishment on an enormous scale. There are no red lines for Netanyahu's Government. The actions of the IDF over the past 369 days are not those of a moral army as Israel claims, but actions that have crossed every moral and legal boundary. Netanyahu's pursuit of Gaza's destruction is relentless and will not stop unless forced to do so. I welcome the reinstatement of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees funding by this Government, but we must do more.



**Mr Adnan Hussain** (Blackburn) (Ind): I agree that calls for additional aid and safe routes for the delivery of aid into Gaza are vital and encouraged. However, does the hon. Member agree that questions must be raised as to the absurdity of a situation in which we as a country provide both the aid and the weapons to bomb the besieged people of Gaza?

**Ayoub Khan:** I agree, and I am sure there will be many similar contributions throughout this debate.

I welcome the Government's reinstatement of UNRWA funding, but we must do more. We must address the root cause of the suffering, and an immediate, permanent ceasefire is absolutely essential. Diplomatic calls from Governments of various nations have fallen on deaf ears. The only option available now is to enforce a ceasefire through the prohibition of all arms sales to Israel. If the UK did that, it would send a clear message to others, who would inevitably follow suit, but innocent lives are being lost and the Government have done little to change the course of Israeli aggression. I ask the rhetorical question: how can we send aid with one hand while providing the weapons of destruction with the other? How can we claim to stand for morality and justice when we are complicit in this collective punishment?

Time is of the essence. Every 10 minutes, another child in Gaza dies. This regime of mass murder and destruction is fuelled by the west's unconditional support and its granting of full impunity for breaches of international humanitarian law. The time for change is now, not later. Will the Minister admit that Israel is actively blocking efforts to distribute humanitarian aid and reach a ceasefire agreement? What will the Government do to encourage Israel to open border crossings for humanitarian aid?

**Several hon. Members** *rose—*

**Valerie Vaz (in the Chair):** Order. A number of Members wish to speak, so I will impose an informal three-minute time limit. Please be kind to each other so you can all get in.

3.11 pm

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) for securing this absolutely crucial and essential debate.

Last night, my hon. Friends the Members for Blackburn (Mr Hussain) and for Birmingham Perry Barr and I attended a film showing by Al Jazeera at a cinema near here. The film showed very raw footage of the behaviour of Israeli soldiers in Gaza. It was about the destruction of life and of the appalling death toll of children, in particular, across Gaza. It showed soldiers cheering when they destroyed an entire Palestinian village. It showed pictures—devastatingly realistic in the horror they showed—of the torture of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli prisons.

Afterwards, we had a question and answer session with a number of lawyers, medical people and so on. A doctor said that when she tried to enter Gaza to act as a doctor, she was restricted to one suitcase and told that she had to bring in three days' water supply, have her own personal security and have a car and a driver with her at all times just to undertake her work. She said that there are very few hospitals working in Gaza, and the

conditions are appalling and abominable. Many doctors are now not working in Gaza any more because they simply cannot get in; Israel controls all access and exit. The small number of very brave and wonderful doctors who were working there are now being forced to go elsewhere. The film showed the way in which Israel's occupation has been entirely directed towards the destruction of Palestinian life—Palestinian buildings, schools, roads, hospitals and everything else.

I have never forgotten going to Beech primary school in Jabalia refugee camp many years ago—a wonderful school in a wonderful place with wonderful children. With joy, the children sat down and read, through translation, the poetry they had written about their lives, their hopes and what they wanted to achieve. We then went on to the roof of the school, and we could see the fence on one side and, not that far away, the sea on the other. To the north, we could see Ashkelon. We could hear the sadness in their voices when they said, "We are never going to be able to go anywhere. We are never going to be able to travel anywhere. We are forever prisoners in this school and our homes," but at least at that time they had homes and a school. I have seen the footage and seen the films; the school is totally destroyed. Many of those children who I met, who were so happy in those days, are now deceased. Famine is there in Gaza. It is recognised as a famine around the world. Polluted water, inadequate food, inadequate medical supplies—it is an absolutely appalling situation.

Yes, obviously we have to demand all the aid that we can to go into Gaza—we would do that for any people anywhere in the world—but when there are more than 40,000 recorded deaths, and possibly 100,000 more bodies waiting to be discovered under the rubble, the answer has to be a political one. Why are we still supplying arms to Israel, knowing full well that those arms, in contravention of ICJ rulings, are actually being used to bomb civilian targets in Gaza?

War crimes are being committed before our very eyes on our televisions every night. It is up to our Government to show that they believe in international law. If they did, they would halt the supply of weapons to Israel, because they know full well that those weapons are being used to destroy human life, in breach of all aspects of international humanitarian law.

**Valerie Vaz (in the Chair):** I expect to take winding-up speeches from the Front Benches at about 4.5 pm.

3.16 pm

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Ms Vaz. I also want to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) for securing this important and timely debate.

A year on from the tragic terrorist attack by Hamas, with an estimated 101 people still being held hostage, we are seeing the devastating impact on innocent civilians caught up in this war. As we have heard, it is estimated that more than 41,000 Palestinians have been killed, more than 90,000 injured and up to 1.9 million internally displaced. Thousands of families are trapped, unable to leave their homes to find vital food and water, and many now face starvation.

Shortly after this conflict started I met with Islamic Relief UK, which is based in my constituency of Vauxhall and Camberwell Green. Staff spoke to me about the devastation and the impact on the ground in Gaza, including the bombing of their offices, and the fact that they lost contact with their aid workers for two days. Over the past year, Islamic Relief UK has distributed more than £26 million of aid to the people in Palestine. I pay tribute to Islamic Relief UK and the many other aid organisations and charities working on the ground, with their aid workers risking their own lives to help innocent civilians.

Along with many others, I welcomed the Foreign Secretary's announcement, in his first statement to the House, that the UK would lift the pause on funding to UNRWA, and that an additional £21 million would be made available to support that work; but sadly, that money will be too late for the many people who have already died.

I had the opportunity to meet a senior representative from UNRWA last week, and he outlined three main challenges to me. The first was logistical: the vital aid continues to be blocked. There are an estimated 70 trucks going in, compared with the 400 pre this conflict. Moving aid around Gaza is nigh on impossible, with an estimated 30% of that aid being looted because people are just so desperate. Aid workers are being attacked.

The second was political: we all have to acknowledge the concerted attempt to discredit and undermine the work of UNRWA. As the Foreign Secretary stated:

"UNRWA is absolutely central to those efforts; no other agency can deliver aid on the scale needed."—[*Official Report*, 19 July 2024; Vol. 752, c. 300.]

However, there are three Bills currently in the Knesset aimed at discrediting UNRWA's operation in East Jerusalem, stripping its status as an aid agency and declaring it a terrorist organisation.

The third challenge was financial; there are still serious difficulties, and the largest donor—the US—has still not reinstated its funding. Is the Minister aware of today's letter, co-signed by 15 leading aid agencies including Islamic Relief UK, Medical Aid for Palestinians and Oxfam, calling on the UK to continue to take a stand on upholding international law, to oppose the annexation in northern Gaza, to support the independence of the ICJ, and to review the sale of arms? As we enter the second year of this conflict, we restate our calls for an immediate ceasefire and lasting peace in the region.

3.19 pm

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) on securing this debate.

Earlier this week, six Arab ambassadors came to speak to Members in this House, from not only Palestine and Lebanon, the two main protagonists, but Egypt, Saudi, Jordan and Bahrain, and they said that they spoke on behalf of the whole Arab community. The message they wanted to get across to Members was that long-term peace and security is attainable in the region; it has been for nearly 20 years now under the Arab peace initiative. Looking forward, that is still the prospect they want, which includes not just Arab states but the 58 Muslim states around the world not just recognising but co-operating fully with Israel.

However, what we have seen over the past year is the opposite; there has been the ratcheting up of violence. Now that has happened on both sides and nobody present holds a brief for Hamas or Hezbollah, but because of the asymmetric nature of this war, almost all the deaths post the terrible atrocity of 7 October last year have been predominantly among Palestinians—41,000 in Gaza and almost 1,000 in the west bank—as well as now over 2,000 Lebanese civilians. The question today is: what will the British Government's response be? Yes, the Government have consistently called for a ceasefire. The Minister, who does his job excellently, has been very consistent in saying that, but there is no response; on the contrary—the atrocities get worse.

What is happening? We saw today another school attacked and nearly 30 people killed there, and there are attacks on UN positions by Israeli forces. Yes, the Government are right to emphasise aid—which is the subject of this debate—and the practicalities of getting aid in, but also those attacks on civilians are happening daily. There is the forcible transfer of the population. There are beaches of international law happening all the time. There is the collective punishment of the Palestinians, particularly in Gaza. There is famine and disease throughout the territory.

I say to the Minister gently that we need more from the Government now. We need to know what they will do to ensure a ceasefire. What practical steps can they take with allies? We also need—this was emphasised very much by the ambassadors this week—an early and clear recognition of the Palestinian state. Until that exists, it is almost impossible to frame the terms of a ceasefire and a lasting peace in the region, and that is what we need.

3.22 pm

**John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): I want to raise again the issue of the evacuation of seriously injured children from Gaza. When the Ukraine war started, we very rapidly put in place a mechanism for the evacuation of injured children from Ukraine to hospitals here, to ensure that they had the appropriate treatment. It was a system that seemed to have worked effectively. Soon after the attack on Gaza, my friend Kate Hollern, who was the hon. Member for Blackburn, raised in this House the issue of trying to instigate a similar scheme for Palestinian children. I think she did that around November or December, but we heard nothing back. I raised the issue again on the Floor of the House with the then deputy Foreign Secretary—the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell)—and we were given an assurance. I had met with the voluntary organisation Save Gaza's Children, which is based in France, and there is also Save A Child, which was doing work at that point to evacuate children to Italy and to other countries surrounding Palestine.

I raised the issue again in May because we had no response. Then the general election happened so I wrote to the Prime Minister, because I felt this needed a prime ministerial push to get it through. I raised it with the Foreign Secretary because we needed to ensure that our diplomatic efforts were involved, and I wrote to the Home Secretary as well because we needed the visa arrangements put in place. I never received a response.

I wrote again in August to the Minister for Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), and I did receive a response. However,

[John McDonnell]

it was not about the evacuation but the assistance being provided to organisations hopefully working as best they could within Gaza. So I wrote again, and I have not received a second response. I am not sure what is happening in Government on this. I understand that a new Government have come in and it is difficult settling down and sorting out arrangements, but this is a matter of urgency.

We have had further reports this morning of another hospital being attacked, and we have also heard reports of the doctors being threatened that if they did not evacuate they would be arrested. We have even had ambulance workers arrested this morning as well. They are being forced to choose between evacuating children from intensive care, which is risky, or leaving them behind, and as a result some doctors are risking their lives.

We could do exactly as we have done with Ukraine, by simply establishing a system to ensure that those seriously injured children are evacuated. Clinicians are willing to assist here; in fact, I have had clinicians contact me to say, "What can we do?" and "How can we assist?" I ask the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Hamish Falconer), to take this and come back as a matter of urgency. Children are dying as a result and we cannot stand to one side.

3.25 pm

**Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) for securing this afternoon's debate. In the short time I have, I want to focus on the plight of Christians in Palestine. In April, I was honoured to meet Father Gabriel Romanelli, the parish priest at the Holy Family church in Gaza, who informed a group of MPs of the tragedies that had befallen his flock, none more so than the killing of Nahida Anton and her daughter Samar. They were two parishioners at the church who were killed inside the parish compound by a sniper; several others were wounded.

It was the week before Christmas, a Christmas that for Palestinians would be observed under rubble, in ruins and in perpetual fear. Rev. Munther Isaac put that into words when he said:

"If Jesus was born today, he'd be born under the rubble of Gaza."

We all know that places of worship should be protected under the Geneva conventions. I say "should be" because in this and many other instances, they are not. It is heartbreaking, then, to consider that both Nahida and Samar must have thought they were safe in church when, in fact, a sniper was targeting them. I cannot imagine what the family was going through.

What happened at the Holy Family church is a microcosm of the war itself: a war where human rights are ignored, where long-standing conventions are breached and where innocent people like Nahida and Samar are killed. Earlier this year, I asked the former deputy Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), whether the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office condemned the attack. He answered:

"We are not clear about the full facts of what happened."—[*Official Report*, 8 January 2024; Vol. 743, c. 46.]

In contrast, Cardinal Vincent, the Archbishop of Westminster, was unambiguous. He said:

"They were shot in cold blood inside the premises of the parish, where there are no belligerents."

He also said:

"The people in Gaza...are not given to tell lies."

I implore the Minister from the bottom of my heart to listen to the Palestinians in Gaza, and reflect on the bitter injustices of Nahida and Samar's deaths and all those who have suffered similar fates. The last time I spoke about Palestine in Westminster Hall, the death toll was 25,000. It is now, as we have heard, well over 41,000. I urge the Minister to use the full weight of the FCDO to bring this war to an end, and to commit to the Palestinian people that we will assist them in rebuilding their lives. We need diplomacy, not an all-out war. The people of Gaza cannot have another Christmas under the rubble.

3.28 pm

**Shokat Adam** (Leicester South) (Ind): It is an honour to speak under your chairship, Ms Vaz, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) for bringing this vital discussion. I want to reiterate and confirm what my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) said in discussing the children. The suffering of all victims of war is devastating, but when it comes to innocent children belonging to all faiths and no faith, it really does affect our humanity and our future.

This is my question to the Minister. As we speak, there are fewer than 16 hospitals standing in Gaza and there is nowhere for children to be treated. More than 50,000 children require treatment who are not even victims of the war; they are suffering from malnutrition and other ailments. Can we, like some of our European partners, look at avenues and mechanisms to bring those children here or treat them somewhere neutral to give them that much-needed support?

3.29 pm

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) for organising today's debate.

The tragedy of Gaza just leaves us speechless. The devastation that we are witnessing on our screens is horrific, but to be in Gaza is unimaginable at this time. We stand by all those on both sides who are experiencing the trauma of loss, through hostage taking and lives lost.

We know that this can be prevented. It is immoral and it is man-made. We have to act more strongly. Of course, we have to end the sale of all arms, and end those export licences. We have to increase our funding to UNRWA, as the ambassador has called for, and we need to apply greater leverage, including sanctions, to ensure that we can get a political outcome.

I have to question what happened on 18 September at the UN General Assembly. We could have used our influence in that forum in a different way—124 countries, including our allies, France, Spain, Norway and New Zealand, had the courage to call for a ceasefire and to put that on record. It is one thing to call for something, but when we have a vote, that is decisive and it makes a



difference. I just cannot comprehend why we did not use our leverage at that critical point to try and stand by the people who are suffering in Gaza right now.

We know that things are getting even worse, with the suffering getting even greater. We think about the seasonal change that is coming and the risks that come from that; we see the data from the Famine Early Warning Systems Network, highlighting the scale of malnutrition, hunger and the spread of disease; we know that people are dying every day before our eyes and we could do more.

When the Minister and his colleagues are at those platforms, I ask that he does everything possible within his power to use that leverage to call this to an end. We cannot just cross by on the other side. We must not let perfection be the enemy of good. Even if resolutions are not perfect, we know that they can save lives, they can end the carnage and they can build the hope of having food, clean water and aid to heal wounds and bring pain relief. I say to the Minister that every opportunity must be utilised to ensure that we have the humanitarian response to end this nightmare.

3.32 pm

**Apsana Begum** (Poplar and Limehouse) (Ind): In February this year, I secured and led a debate on the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza. During the debate, I quoted Save the Children International's chief executive officer's harrowing plea:

"We are running out of words to describe the horror unfolding for Gaza's children."

Eight months later, it is absolutely and utterly devastating to be here again today, and that things have gone from bad to worse. As such, I urge the Government today to refrain from the insult of the usual euphemistic phrasing of speaking of too many civilians being killed or broad references to the humanitarian situation without condemning the actions that are so clearly responsible.

This is not about some random natural disaster. It is just beyond disturbing that so many cannot express a simple condemnation of the type of war being conducted by the Israeli military—the unprecedented death toll, the violence against women and children, the deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure, the blocking of aid and the weaponisation of starvation.

It is just not enough to repeat the lines that Israel must uphold international human rights standards in theory, when it is so clear that they have not and are not doing so, and have effectively been given the go-ahead to continue to not do so. Quite frankly, the UK's continued support and facilitation of this is absolutely shocking to my constituents, and indeed to the majority of people in the UK.

No matter the brutality of the censorship at home, the silencing or the spin, the inescapable truth is that civilians in Gaza, including large numbers of children, are facing healthcare shortages and diseases. This is what happens when hospitals are targeted and health and sanitation and other infrastructure is wilfully destroyed. My constituents have opposed this, but this is what the UK continues to facilitate. Civilians in Gaza, including large numbers of children, are not only starving, but being starved. This is what happens when food is being prevented from getting to those who need it. Civilians in Gaza, including large numbers of children, are not simply dying; they are being killed.

The lifting of the pause on funding the UNRWA is a welcome step forward, but as we speak, new mass displacement orders will worsen the entire, already dire, situation. I speculate that the Minister will likely assert something along the lines that aid must get to where it is needed in theory, yet everyone is clear that aid is being blocked and hindered by Israel, the UK's close and staunch ally. The best way we know to ensure that aid is delivered is to secure a ceasefire. It is important that there is an arms embargo, including of F-35 fighter jets, which are being traded to be used against civilians. It has implications for global human rights benchmarks.

The horrors that continue to unfold before our eyes mean that we are being changed forever, but it has been made very clear that UK and US foreign policy interests are being pursued with an utter disregard for Palestinian life. It is chilling, and the complicity will never, ever be forgotten.

3.36 pm

**Barry Gardiner** (Brent West) (Lab): As politicians, we talk of the international rules-based system, by which we mean the World Trade Organisation and the United Nations, but often we do so only when it suits our position. When it does not, we ignore it. That is why it is crucial that we grasp the legal implications of the decision promulgated on 19 July this year by the International Court of Justice. It settled the law in its advisory opinion on the legality of Israel's continued presence in the occupied Palestinian territory. The opinion came from a request by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2022, and I believe it carries immense weight. It is the interpretation of our world's highest court of law as it relates to the occupation of Palestine.

The court ruled that the occupied Palestinian territory is to be considered a single territorial unit, which means that the failure to recognise Palestine as a state is now out of step with international law. On 10 September, Palestine took its seat at the 79th session of the General Assembly of the United Nations. It is not yet a full member, because it has been blocked by the United States, but it has the right to submit proposals and amendments. The Government of the UK still does not recognise the Palestinian state, and I believe that that is now incompatible with international law.

The court ruled that settlements and outposts in the west bank and East Jerusalem were unlawful. It does not matter that Israeli law considers settlements to be lawful; they are not, and they should be evacuated. The court ruled that Israel's exploitation of natural resources in settled land was also unlawful. The court ruled that Israel occupied Gaza. It ruled that it occupied the west bank and East Jerusalem. It ruled that that occupation was unlawful. It ruled that the occupation must be brought to an end.

That also means that, in its actions, Israel must behave not as a warring nation state against another warring state, but as an occupying force, with all the obligations that entails about its conduct, including ensuring that aid can get through to all who need it. Israel ought to cease its unlawful activities, halt all new settlement activity and provide full reparation for the damage caused by its wrongful acts, which includes returning land, property and assets seized since the occupation began in 1967 and allowing displaced Palestinians to return to their original places of residence.

[Barry Gardiner]

The court made it clear that other states also have obligations. It emphasised that all states are required not to recognise the illegal situation created by Israel's actions in the occupied territories. That means that they should not engage in trade, investment or diplomatic relations that would entrench Israel's unlawful presence. The advisory opinion is a landmark in the legal and political struggle over the fate of the Palestinian people and the integrity of international law. It highlights the obligations of all states, including the United Kingdom, to ensure that the rule of law prevails. We are all duty bound not only to act in the interests of justice and human rights, but to uphold the very principles of international law. That is the law. It is clear. It has been authoritatively stated by the court. What is not clear is whether Governments will abide by it. The law can state, the court can rule, but none of it brings about anything unless the power of enforcement lies behind it.

In the UK we are very fond of saying that we respect the international court and the international rules-based order. My challenge to the Minister is this: show it.

3.40 pm

**Mr Adnan Hussain** (Blackburn) (Ind): I repeat again the absurdity of the situation whereby we give aid with one hand to the besieged population of Gaza and provide weapons with the other, which has created the catastrophic circumstances that have taken the lives of over 40,000. Although the Prime Minister has made his position on the refusal to stop all the arms sales to Israel abundantly clear in Parliament just this week, I will none the less press the matter. Will the Minister assure us, especially in the light of further news today of a school housing displaced civilians in Gaza being bombed? Just weeks ago, a humanitarian safe zone, al-Mawasi, a camp identified by Israel itself, was bombed, with families dissipated in seconds. I therefore ask the Minister once again whether the Government's position on arms sales to Israel will be revisited. Can he also answer whether, given the abundance of evidence already available, arms sales to a country plausibly accused of committing genocide can be morally or legally justified?

3.42 pm

**Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) on securing this debate. Before the recent recess, I tabled a written question to the Government. The answer is overdue, so I will briefly provide the background and put it to the Minister.

On 2 September, the Government revoked licences for all items used in the current conflict in Gaza that go to the Israel Defence Forces. It did so because there exists a clear risk that they might be used to commit or facilitate a serious violation of international humanitarian law. This is evidenced by events such as the IDF-confirmed use of 2,000 lb bombs, bunker-busting bombs, in a declared safe zone in al-Mawasi in July when they killed at least 90 Palestinians and injured over 30.

The revocation includes licences for F-35 fighter jet components where they go directly to Israel. They are revoked, but those in the supply chain in the global pool are not. Clearly, the components can still be used to

facilitate a serious violation of international humanitarian law and to frustrate humanitarian aid. So I ask my Government to make it their policy to seek to negotiate an end-use agreement with F-35 programme supply chain and electronic stockpile management system counterparts, to end the re-export of F-35s to Israel.

The Dutch Government have suspended direct sales but continue to supply the global pool, but surely a discussion must be had with partner nations on managing the programme so that the global pool of spare parts is not used to repair Israeli F-35 jets. Unless the issue is raised and resolved with partner nations, I submit that the Government are at risk of breaching our own commitments to upholding international humanitarian law. I pray in aid the UN inquiry, which said today that it found that Israel carried out a "concerted policy" of destroying Gaza's healthcare systems in the Gaza war—actions amounting to both

"war crimes and the crime against humanity of extermination", so I urge my Government to utilise all the levers at their disposal, and accept that the recognition of the state of Palestine is a prerequisite of peace—and that the optimal time to do so is now.

3.45 pm

**Melanie Ward** (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) for securing this important debate.

It is impossible to do justice to the horrors in Gaza—famine conditions and polio among them—in the short time we have today. I was in Gaza in April this year, six months into the horrific humanitarian catastrophe that continues now. What I witnessed then was haunting, and it is so much worse in Gaza today.

I wish to raise two main issues. First, there are alarming reports in the Israeli media that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu is considering a proposal from Smotrich and Ben Gvir, the far-right members of his Cabinet, which would effectively prevent aid agencies, including the UN, from operating or distributing aid in Gaza. Instead, it would hand all such responsibility to the Israeli military, reportedly including the running of field hospitals. There are many reasons why that would be unacceptable.

In January this year, the International Court of Justice ordered "immediate and effective" measures to protect Palestinians in Gaza from the risk of genocide by ensuring sufficient humanitarian assistance and enabling access to basic services. Despite that, the number of aid trucks that entered Gaza last month was the lowest we have seen since the start of the year. This is not an accident; the aid is deliberately obstructed by the Israeli Government. In April, I saw the queues of hundreds of trucks filled with aid stuck at crossings into Gaza. The aid is there—it is simply not allowed to enter Gaza in the quantities needed, nor are aid workers allowed to safely distribute it. The fact that more than 300 aid workers and almost 1,000 healthcare workers have been killed in the last year is testament to that.

When I left Gaza, I also visited warehouses full of aid items rejected by the Israeli authorities. I checked the list this morning, preparing for this debate. It included: wooden and metal crutches, wheelchairs, green sleeping bags, commodes, solar lamps, first-aid kits, an anaesthesia machine, generators, a bag of UNICEF footballs, bleach,

and pots and pans. I could go on. The idea that a Government and military who do this should be allowed to take operational control of a humanitarian aid effort is unconscionable. I ask the Minister to be clear today that our Government oppose this, and to raise the subject with the Israelis. There is no excuse for the Israeli Government's denial of Palestinian's access to humanitarian aid. It is a violation of international law.

Secondly, the situation for civilians across Gaza is a living nightmare. Worst of all is the situation for civilians in the north, who have been trapped for over a year now. Months ago, civilians there were eating grass and animal feed to try to survive, and it is so much worse now. I want to raise alarm at the Israeli military's most recent forced displacement orders for civilians in the north of Gaza being told to move south. This includes orders to evacuate critically ill patients and healthcare workers from the Al-Awda, Indonesian and Kamal Adwan hospitals. This morning I saw footage of intubated children and babies in incubators in the paediatric intensive care unit at Kamal Adwan hospital; they cannot evacuate, and even if they could, there is nowhere safe to go. Does the Minister agree that this military action is intolerable, unacceptable and must end?

Our new Government have taken important first steps on UNRWA, arms and the ICC. There is much more to do. It is true that the Palestinians of Gaza need a ceasefire and access to aid, and aid workers need to be able to work safely, but Palestinians do not just need aid. They have the same rights to safety, freedom and dignity as everyone else, and we in this House would do well to remember that.

3.50 pm

**Tony Vaughan** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz, and I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) for securing the debate.

The situation in Gaza is horrific and tragic. The British Red Cross has stated that more than 41,000 people have been killed in Gaza, and many more have been injured and displaced. Hostages are still being held and survivors are traumatised.

The meetings that I have attended with ambassadors from the region have searingly impressed upon me how desperate and urgent the situation now is in Gaza and the west bank. Making sure that enough aid enters and is properly distributed to the people in Gaza is a moral imperative. It is also a legal imperative. In January, the International Court of Justice ordered Israel to take measures to prevent genocide, in order to ensure that humanitarian aid reaches Palestinians, but that order is not yet being complied with. As hon. Friends have said, aid is still being blocked. It is of particular concern that the Israeli military are forcing hospitals—which are full of displaced civilians, medical staff and sick patients, all of whom are protected under international law—to shut down. The health system in Gaza must not be allowed to collapse.

I thank the Minister for all his work on this issue. Will he confirm that the UK is taking urgent action to stop Israel forcibly displacing Palestinians from the north; to ensure that adequate aid reaches those who need it; to ensure that civilians, including those in hospitals and in their homes, are protected at all times; and, ultimately, to secure an urgent ceasefire? Respect for the international rule of law requires this.

3.51 pm

**Steve Witherden** (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairpersonship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) on securing this crucial debate, which coincides with today's nationwide workplace day of action for Palestine.

This past year has been marked by indiscriminate loss, with lives tragically taken on 7 October last year and in the ongoing horrors that we have witnessed unfolding since then. Over 41,000 people have been reported killed in Gaza, alongside 695 in the west bank, with many more unaccounted for beneath the rubble.

The impact on women and children has been particularly severe, with Oxfam reporting last week that more women and children have been killed in Gaza by the Israeli military in the past year than have been killed in any other conflict in the last two decades. In addition to the ongoing daily bombardment, the malnutrition, disease and unmet medical needs pose an even greater threat to Palestinian lives.

Yesterday marked a year since Israel's Minister of Defence declared a "complete siege" on Gaza, stating that there would be:

"No electricity, no food, no water, no gas—it's all closed."

The humanitarian crisis that has followed has been beyond comprehension. Approximately 83% of required food aid is blocked from entering Gaza, while the risk of famine becomes more imminent. Over 70% of civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, has been destroyed, with more than 500 recorded attacks on medical facilities and hundreds of healthcare workers having been killed. Last month, the United Nations reported that the number of aid workers killed in Gaza in the past year is the highest ever recorded in a single crisis.

With food aid and healthcare under attack, and aid workers paying the ultimate price for their efforts to provide relief, we must urgently address this humanitarian disaster and ensure that unimpeded aid reaches all those who so desperately need it. I welcome the actions taken by the Labour Government in our first months in office to facilitate the entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza. We have restored funding to UNRWA and engaged with the United Nations Security Council to ensure that there is a global focus on protecting civilians in Gaza. However, given the scale of the crisis, our Government should be doing everything in their power to secure an immediate and permanent ceasefire. Without one, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza will worsen, essential aid will be obstructed and suffering will be prolonged.

The decision in September to suspend about 30 UK arms export licences to Israel from a total of approximately 350 marked a crucial step towards achieving a ceasefire for all Palestinians and Israelis. However, by excluding export licences for F-35 fighter jet parts from that announcement, the UK risks complicity in Israel's potential violations of international law. F-35s, described as the most lethal fighter jets in the world, are partly manufactured in Britain and are currently deployed in Gaza, causing significant civilian casualties and hindering the distribution of aid while destroying vital healthcare infrastructure. Can the Minister clarify how the decision to continue allowing licences for F-35 components exported via third-party countries aligns with the UK's international legal obligations? How does this approach ensure that



[Steve Witherden]

critical aid can be delivered securely to alleviate the suffering in Gaza, especially given the risks to medical workers and the destruction of healthcare facilities?

We must urgently end these atrocities and stand for humanity. Allowing the horrifying decline of this conflict to continue will lead to even greater consequences. Diolch yn fawr.

3.56 pm

**Tahir Ali** (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz.

The people of Gaza are being let down by the international community. We have reached a point where the human suffering and cultural devastation in the area is undeniable, yet we continue to fail to provide a sustainable amount of life-saving aid. The Palestinian people should not be subjected to a lack of food, water and medical supplies.

I have received hundreds of emails from the constituents of Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley, who are extremely worried about the restrictions on food and humanitarian aid due to the new customs rule on aid trucks enforced by the Israeli Government. The United Nations reports that in September, more than 90% of efforts to get trucks into Gaza were either denied or delayed by the Israeli Government.

Palestinian children are suffering the most from the catastrophic restrictions imposed on them. Over 2 million people—more than 90% of the population of Gaza—are living in tents after being forced from their homes by the Israeli Government's actions. This will prove to be a deadly winter, with the danger of hypothermia. Israel's ongoing attack is punishing the Palestinian people by denying them the human right to adequate housing.

Now is the time for action. We have heard words in this House for more than 12 months, but it is about time they were translated into action. Israel must be held accountable for the war crimes it is committing, and this Government must now stop all arms sales to Israel. The international community needs to work together and look for viable ways to get vital aid into Gaza.

Finally, we need to push for a full, permanent ceasefire to stop this humanitarian disaster, and give international organisations proper access to Gaza. I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) for securing this debate.

3.59 pm

**Chris Murray** (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): It does not need saying, because everyone with eyes can see it, but we cannot say it often enough: too many civilians have died over the last year in the middle east. It is so important that as few as possible follow them.

Before being elected, I worked at Save the Children, and I have worked on migration policy for the past 15 years. I am profoundly worried by the high levels of displacement we are seeing in the middle east. One million people have been displaced in Lebanon. Within Gaza, it is estimated that nine in 10 people have been displaced at some point. This is awful for those personally affected, but it is also profoundly politically destabilising to an already febrile situation, and it adds to the potential for escalation and therefore miscalculation.

We should be terrified of escalation and miscalculation. That is the biggest threat to the humanitarian situation, because we have already seen things escalate appallingly quickly. We must be clear: “escalate to de-escalate” is a falsehood, it is misguided and it will strategically misfire for all. Will the Government strain every sinew to avoid further escalation in the middle east? The reason is not just political or diplomatic; it is humanitarian. Too many have died already, and the only way to stop more joining them is by stopping escalation.

I know that the Minister will be constrained in what he can say today. I welcome the decisions on UNRWA, arms and the ICC, and the commitment to the rule of law, but can he reassure us that the Government's aim in this situation is de-escalation for humanitarian purposes?

**Valerie Vaz (in the Chair):** We will try to get everyone in. We have three people and I want to start wind-ups at 4.5 pm, so please keep it short.

4.1 pm

**Laurence Turner** (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) for securing this important and timely debate.

Earlier this week, the House marked the one-year anniversary of the 7 October atrocities. On that day and the days that followed, Hamas and other groups intended to ignite a wider war, and the death and destruction that would follow in its wake. Today, when over 2 million people have been displaced, over 40,000 Palestinians are dead and the threat of wider war looms all too closely, we must redouble our efforts in pursuit of an immediate ceasefire, the return of hostages and real progress—after these long years—towards a two-state solution that upholds the dignity of the Palestinian people and the security and territorial integrity of both nations.

Six months ago, the Israeli Defence Minister said:

“We plan to flood Gaza with aid and we are expecting to reach 500 trucks per day.”

However, since then the World Health Organisation has warned that lifesaving hospital aid has been cut off, and the UN has warned that starvation has spread throughout Gaza. There were just 52 aid trucks each day in September—a bare tenth of the pre-October rates and far short of the total needed to relieve the extreme distress.

Noting the UK Government's existing assessment that Israel is not ensuring that lifesaving food and medical supplies are reaching civilians in Gaza, I ask the Minister to update us today on what representations and protests the UK Government have made to the Israeli Government on the entry of food and aid into Gaza. Secondly, what steps are the Government taking to work with aid agencies and civil society to offer protection to aid workers, including British aid workers, who face unacceptable risk? Finally, will he give us a broader update on the UK Government's efforts to progress ceasefire talks and bring forward a credible reconstruction programme in Gaza?

I know that hon. Members welcome the decision to reinstate UNRWA funding, but that cannot be the end of the process. I also know that the Minister takes this important matter seriously, and I hope he will ensure that there is further debate and scrutiny in this House.

**Valerie Vaz (in the Chair):** Two minutes left.

4.3 pm

**Blair McDougall** (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): I began this week by speaking to commemorate the hostages who were taken on 7 October. I see no contradiction in ending it by recognising the horror of the humanitarian situation within Gaza. It is important to put it on the record that people in Gaza do not choose to be ruled by Hamas. A poll published last month showed that two thirds of people in Gaza support a two-state solution, not the destruction of Israel, and only 6% support Hamas.

In the short time I have, I want to ask the Minister to reflect on three particular things. First, in a deeply uncertain environment, we know one thing: winter is coming. It is about to get colder and wetter, and the lower immunity that people have due to malnutrition—particularly children—means an increased risk of respiratory diseases, diarrhoea and other common diseases. Along with others, I ask the Minister what more he can do to ensure that more shelter and more hygiene kits are allowed through to reach those who need it.

Secondly, looking beyond the ceasefire that we all want, I want to talk about the long tail of insecurity within Gaza. Dozens of bakeries have been destroyed and about two thirds of agricultural land has been damaged in some way. Fields, greenhouses, polytunnels and irrigation systems have been damaged. The plan for the day after has to start now. What plans do the Government have to ensure that horticulture, livestock farming and fishing are restored and the bakeries and markets rebuilt? Otherwise, this will be not a short-term emergency but a long-term problem.

Finally, after the 2014 Gaza war generous pledges were made by international donors for reconstruction. In some cases, the funds pledged simply did not come through. In many cases, attempts to reconstruct were blocked by the Israeli Government. There were other cases. For example, Fatah accused Hamas of stealing hundreds of millions of dollars of reconstruction aid. In 2014, about 150,000 properties were damaged in some way. This war has far outstripped that. What can the Minister do, working with international partners, to ensure that the failures after the last 2014 war in Gaza are not repeated?

4.6 pm

**Brian Mathew** (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): I speak as someone who knew Gaza in the happy times when, as a young university researcher, I went with my Israeli friends from Kibbutz Re'im to meet their Arab friends in Gaza City to drink coffee and trade. We have heard in the debate about the horror and the passion. We have also heard of solutions, a recognition of the state of Palestine and, indeed, the inclusion of the evacuation of wounded children.

War is a horrible thing, and it makes people behave badly, especially when they feel—and, indeed, have been—hurt as the Israelis have been by the events of 7 October last year. There are things that can be done, which we have heard today, including the release of the hostages and the end of the war, but there are also things that must be done in the future to see Palestine's future assured, such as the closure of the illegal settlements in the west bank and the rebuilding of Gaza itself. For that to happen, trust needs to be built, and for that to be

built, our Government need to be talking to not just the leadership but the opposition in Israel. Jaw-jaw is indeed better than war-war.

4.8 pm

**Monica Harding** (Esher and Walton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) on securing the debate on this most critical issue. This is my first contribution in my capacity as Liberal Democrat spokesperson for international development, and this is a hugely pressing issue.

Hon. Members have spoken of the many aid agencies working in incredibly difficult situations and risking their lives. I want to add my voice to the tributes paid to them. Liberal Democrats share the calls we have heard today for an immediate recognition of a Palestinian state and urge the Government to use every lever they have to de-escalate the conflict. Conflict is escalating in the middle east. We are on the brink of a regional war, which would be of devastating consequence to innocent civilians, be they Palestinian, Lebanese, Israeli or Iranian.

We now face a second humanitarian crisis in the region in Lebanon, where hundreds of thousands are already displaced in addition to the many Syrian refugees already living in Lebanon. We cannot afford for Lebanon to become a failed state. We welcome the increase in aid to Lebanon of £10 million but, frankly, that is a drop in the ocean. As recently as 2019-20, the UK ODA allocation to Lebanon was over £200 million. This year we are looking at less than £20 million.

Amidst the tensions in the region, we cannot and must not forget Gaza. The Liberal Democrats continue to call for an immediate bilateral ceasefire in Gaza to resolve the humanitarian devastation there, get the hostages out and open the door to a two-state solution.

There is clearly a dire humanitarian need in the strip. Amidst an escalation of the conflict in the region, the flow of essential goods into Gaza has been critically restricted, causing a drop in aid supplies and a critical shortage of commercial goods. Aid entering Gaza has plummeted to its lowest level in months. If the flow of assistance does not resume, more than 1 million vulnerable people will lose the assistance they rely on in October. Three quarters of Gaza's population rely on food aid to survive. People have run out of ways to cope, food systems have collapsed and the risk of famine persists. The World Health Organisation is now looking to carry out the second phase of a polio inoculation campaign after the first case of polio in Gaza in 25 years was found over the summer.

First, we call on the UK Government to increase humanitarian support to Gaza. The Liberal Democrats have long urged the Government to restore the 0.7% of national income target for international development spending—indeed, when in government, we enshrined that target in law. Now that the aid budget has been so depleted, we face humanitarian crises such as these with one hand tied behind our back. We continue to urge the Government to look again at returning to 0.7%. There are also specific problems with getting aid into Gaza. Not enough humanitarian aid is getting into the strip, and the Rafah crossing is shut. I hope that the Minister will provide an update on what exchanges he and his counterparts have had with all relevant agencies, in particular with the Israeli Government, to ensure that aid is stepped up.

[Monica Harding]

Secondly, we know that there are particular problems with the distribution of aid in Gaza, with no deconfliction system in place. We have heard about how aid entering into one part of the strip does not get to its intended destination, because human need is so great along the way. Will the Minister update us on what work the FCDO is doing to try to make it easier and safer for aid to be distributed in a manner that protects the safety of aid workers?

Thirdly, we are now moving into the winter months, and as the temperatures drop they pose particular challenges to the humanitarian situation in the strip. It is vital that we act now and quickly with our allies to do all we can to ensure that we can support Gazans through these winter months and beyond. Will the Minister update us on what steps he and his ministerial colleagues are taking to that end?

Fourthly, the Liberal Democrats welcome the Government's decision to once again provide UK ODA to UNRWA. Will the Minister update us on what conversations he has had with counterparts in UNRWA, including on the implementation of the Colonna report? It is vital that these recommendations are implemented as soon as possible, thereby ensuring that all work to support Palestinians in Gaza is of the highest possible standards and integrity.

Finally, looking across from Gaza into the west bank, will the Minister update us on the level of UK ODA being provided to support the Palestinian Authority? Supporting the Palestinian Authority and improving wider conditions for Palestinians is absolutely vital at this difficult moment.

4.13 pm

**Dame Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. This afternoon has been an opportunity to hear voices from across the United Kingdom. I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) on securing the debate. We have heard voices not only from Birmingham, but from London and across the English home counties. We have heard strong Scottish voices, and we have heard from Durham and York. In the interests of time, I will not list every constituency from which we heard passionately and expressively that the Palestinians face a devastating humanitarian crisis, but the UK should continue to play a leading role in alleviating that suffering.

This week of all weeks, however, we must remind ourselves that on 7 October Israel suffered an appalling attack—a modern-day pogrom. It was the worst loss of Jewish life since the second world war, a horrific display of antisemitism and a brutal reminder of the existential threats that Israel must contend with. We must always state that Israel has the right to defend itself in accordance with international humanitarian law.

As we have heard, so many innocent civilians are suffering not only in Israel, but in Gaza and now Lebanon. This conflict must come to a sustainable end as quickly as possible, starting with the immediate and unconditional release of the remaining hostages captive in Gaza, including the British citizen Emily Damari. Can I ask the Minister—a former hostage negotiator

himself—for an update on the Government's efforts to secure her release and the release of the other hostages who are in such awful jeopardy?

The previous UK Government trebled our aid commitment in the last financial year and facilitated aid flows into Gaza by land, sea and air. In the interests of time, I will not list them all; I will focus on the 11 airdrops delivered directly to Gaza through a temporary marine corridor that was supported by the Royal Fleet Auxiliary and the funding of field hospitals to treat thousands of patients. Can the Minister confirm that these efforts continue under the new Government?

During the previous Government, Israel committed to increasing the amount of aid getting into Gaza, including by allowing the delivery of humanitarian aid through Ashdod and Erez, extending the opening hours of Kerem Shalom, increasing the total number of aid trucks to at least 500 a day, and allowing more types of aid, including fuel for bakeries and hospitals. We welcome the recent pause for polio vaccinations and wish to put on record our gratitude to the World Health Organisation, the British Red Cross, the World Food Programme and UNICEF staff, who are doing vital humanitarian work and should be commended.

As we have heard today, aid workers are not a target. Protecting humanitarian actors must be a priority, and guaranteed deconfliction for aid convoys and other humanitarian work is essential. We should also take this opportunity to pay tribute to all of the brave aid workers in Gaza and our fellow citizens James Kirby, John Chapman and James Henderson who were killed delivering aid in Gaza earlier this year.

Can we have an update from the Minister on the work that the Government are doing to advance on these key areas? What steps have they taken to help to increase the amount of aid getting over the border into Gaza? What additional aid, supplies and humanitarian support has the UK sent? What action have the Government taken to make the case for the protection of the humanitarian personnel on the ground distributing that aid?

In the interests of time, I will skip over the situation with UNRWA, but I want to hear an update from the Minister on the implementation of the Colonna recommendations and the UK Government's scrutiny of it. As we heard earlier this week from the Leader of the Opposition, the situation in the middle east is grave. There is no equivalence between Iran's terrorist proxies and Israel. Israel has a right to defend itself, and we support it in those goals, but too many innocent civilian lives have been lost and irreparably changed by this conflict. The UK should continue to carefully support them through our humanitarian aid commitments, and I look forward to the Minister reporting to us on the progress made.

4.18 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Hamish Falconer):** I am grateful to the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) for securing this important debate, and I thank you, Ms Vaz, for your expert management of today's proceedings. This is my first debate in this place, so I am sure that I will be considerably less expert, and I beg your indulgence at the outset. I will try to be brief so that I can give the hon. Member an opportunity to respond.



As many have said, this week marked one year since Hamas's brutal attack against Israel. It was the worst attack in its history and without doubt the darkest day in Jewish history since the Holocaust. As many have said in this Chamber, my thoughts are with Jewish people around the world and the Jewish community here in the United Kingdom. More than 1,000 people were massacred, hundreds were taken hostage and many are still cruelly detained today, including Emily Damari. I reiterate our commitment to bringing those hostages home; we will not give up until they are, and work is ongoing on that.

However, as has been the subject of most of the interventions, we also look back on a year of devastating conflict and suffering. I will say a little about the Government's assessment of the situation in Gaza, then, in the time available, I will focus particularly on the humanitarian situation. I recognise that it is my fault that there are some late parliamentary questions on these issues, particularly relating to the detail on F-35s, and I will be pleased to respond in writing.

A year on, close to 42,000 people have now been killed in Gaza, with over half of all bodies identified being women and children. We believe that more than 90% of the population has been displaced, many of them repeatedly. There is now simply no safe place to go. The humanitarian zone covers less than 15% of the Gaza strip, and as has been mentioned, not even that is always safe. It is chronically overcrowded and the lack of clean water and sanitation means that the risk of disease is rife.

Reference has also been made to the severe lack of food which, according to the IPC, means that the whole population is at risk of starvation, and we expect a further update on that in due course. Sixty-six per cent of buildings, including hospitals—as many have mentioned—are damaged or destroyed. Parents cannot feed their children. Children cannot go to school. Families cannot support each other. I have been asked many questions by contributors about humanitarian access, and I want to be clear on the Government's position: it remains wholly inadequate. There have been repeated attacks on convoys, evacuation orders have undermined operations and the level is far below Israel's commitment to flood Gaza with aid.

**Andy McDonald:** I raised earlier the question of the Israeli military action to which the Minister has just referred. In the past hour or so, the UN has stated on its website:

"Israel Defense Forces (IDF) fired on UN peacekeepers in Lebanon early Thursday morning."

Two peacekeepers were injured, which is yet further evidence that Israel behaves with complete contempt and disregard for international law and norms. Will he join me in condemning such action?

**Hamish Falconer:** They have only just come in, but we are very concerned about reports of attacks on staff of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon. The work of UN peacekeepers is incredibly important and a vital contribution to global peace and security. We will be able to say more as reports become clearer.

The situation in Gaza is a catastrophe on all counts. A few contributors have mentioned winterisation. We are deeply concerned that winter is coming in and the shortage of aid into Gaza means that most of the civilian

population is unprepared for the drop in temperature. I will be visiting the region next week in part to look into some of those matters further. We intend to work together with our allies. Since entering office in July, we have made a series of key decisions. Along with our allies, we have been pushing for an immediate ceasefire since day 1, and I was confused by the reference to our position on 18 September. We have been calling for an immediate ceasefire since 4 July, and we will continue to call for an immediate ceasefire. The fact that it has not yet been abided by does not in any way undermine the urgency of what we are doing.

**Rachael Maskell:** I was referring to the UN General Assembly resolution where we did not vote with 124 countries.

**Hamish Falconer:** I think that is an issue in relation to the advisory opinion of the ICJ rather than the ceasefire; that is how I understood my hon. Friend's remarks. I will stick to the ceasefire now, and I can come to the advisory opinion later. We are clear that we need a ceasefire; we need a ceasefire in Gaza and we need a ceasefire in Lebanon. It is clearly a statement of fact that neither of those things is happening, and we continue to work behind the scenes with our partners to try to achieve that. That point has been made by both the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, as well as the whole ministerial team in the Foreign Office.

We are repeatedly urging our Israeli counterparts—I think it is on this issue that I have received the most questions over the afternoon. We are asking them to take three key steps. The first is to take all necessary precautions to avoid civilian casualties, and we have heard many lurid examples of where that has not been the case. The second is to ensure that aid can flow freely into Gaza through all land routes, and many contributors have described how that is not currently the case. The third is to allow the UN and its humanitarian partners to operate safely and effectively. I recognise some of the concerns raised this afternoon about the functioning of UNRWA, so I will say a little bit about that.

**Barry Gardiner:** I congratulate the Minister on making his maiden address. Can he reflect on the verb that he used? He said that we have been "asking" Israel to do those three things. He then went on to elaborate that none of those three had actually been fulfilled. Is it not time to stop "asking" and to do something a little stronger?

**Hamish Falconer:** My colleague will understand that there is a difference between what we can say in public and what we can say in private. However, I reassure him that those points are being made to partners with force, with emphasis and with consistency. As he will have seen through a number of forums over the last few weeks, the UK has made its position absolutely clear. It is, of course, a frustration to me that at this stage, and since we came into power in July, we are still having some of those discussions, so I recognise the frustration in his voice.

On my first day as a Minister, we lifted the funding pause on UNRWA. We provided £21 million to support its humanitarian appeal in Gaza. No other agency can deliver aid to Gaza on the scale that is needed. We must

[*Hamish Falconer*]

support UNRWA to do its job effectively. Of course, in delivering, we expect it to meet the highest standards of neutrality, as laid out in Catherine Colonna's independent review, and the Minister for Development has met her to discuss such matters. Of our funding to UNRWA this year, £1 million has gone to support the implementation of its agreed action plan. However, I take note of the reference to some of the discussions in the Israeli Knesset. I want to emphasise the importance that the UK places on UNRWA, on its continued function and its unique role in the area, as well as our full support for the UN Secretary-General.

**John McDonnell:** I am sorry to interrupt the Minister's flow, but before he sits down, can he give me some assurance that he will take back to his colleagues the issue about the evacuation of children? I raised it again on Monday with the Prime Minister and still got no response.

**Hamish Falconer:** I was coming to that issue, but I will take it now.

I am very familiar with these issues; in fact, as an official in 2014, I was working with the mass atrocity prevention hub, where I know my colleagues have also served, to try to identify children at that time and in that stage of the war. It is incredibly depressing to be in this Chamber 10 years on talking about injured children in Gaza again. At that time, I was tasked with trying to find children who could benefit from UK medical assistance, and I was honestly not able to find children who would not be better served in the region. Having discussed the matter with officials—I understand the Minister for Development has looked at this as well—we primarily share the view expressed in WHO guidance that children should be treated in the region as much as possible. That will mean in most cases that being treated in Egypt or somewhere nearby is going to be more appropriate than being treated in the UK. However, I will go back to the Department and secure a fuller answer.

I want to return briefly to the mandate of the UN. We are clear that Israel must respect the mandate of the UN and must enable humanitarian workers to travel easily into and throughout Gaza.

**Apsana Begum:** It is absolutely clear that aid and aid workers are being hindered and blocked by Israel. At the same time, the UK considers Israel to be one of its

closest allies. How does that make sense in terms of how the UK represents itself at the UN and on the world platform? The Minister seems to be suggesting that efforts are being made to secure a ceasefire to provide aid, when it is obvious that there is a block and that the UK is facilitating that, as opposed to opposing it.

**Hamish Falconer:** I do not accept that we are facilitating rather than opposing. I could not be clearer in everything I have said this afternoon about the position of the British Government. I have been clear with my colleagues about our frustration that we have not been able to make more progress on the things that we have been calling for. I want to reassure colleagues across the House that the whole ministerial team is working hard day and night on these issues. We recognise the acute nature of the situation before us, and we treat it with the full gravity that it deserves.

**Mr Hussain:** Will the Minister give way?

**Hamish Falconer:** I will try to make a tiny bit more progress, and then I will hand back.

**Valerie Vaz (in the Chair):** You have a minute left, Minister.

**Hamish Falconer:** Then I will probably get to the end, in order to allow people to respond.

From the Prime Minister down, we will continue to call on all parties to act in accordance with international humanitarian law. Earlier in July, when he was visiting the region, the Foreign Secretary announced £5.5 million in new medical aid to field hospitals in Gaza; I think that was the subject of a question that was asked today. We are working to try to bolster medical capacity for patients. We think that is best done in the region, and we are frustrated by the impediments that still exist, particularly around children being able to access medical care and other aid.

**Valerie Vaz (in the Chair):** Order. I want to put the Question.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered humanitarian aid and Gaza.

4.30 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*

# Written Statements

*Thursday 10 October 2024*

## BUSINESS AND TRADE

### Plan to Make Work Pay and Employment Rights Bill

**The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds):**

#### DELIVERING THE GOVERNMENT'S PLAN TO MAKE WORK PAY—INTRODUCTION OF THE EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS BILL

The plan to make work pay sets out a significant and ambitious agenda to ensure workplace rights are fit for a modern economy, empower working people, and contribute to economic growth. Today, the Government are fulfilling the manifesto commitment to bring forward legislation within 100 days of entering office by introducing the Employment Rights Bill.

Upgrading the UK labour market so it is fit for our modern economy is a key step to kickstarting economic growth, alongside other planks of our modern supply side approach, including planning reform, kickstarting a skills revolution, a modern industrial strategy and a plan to tackle inactivity. The Bill will support the Government's mission to increase productivity and create the right conditions for long-term sustainable, inclusive, and secure economic growth by giving the British public the work, wages, prosperity, security, dignity, and the living standards that everyone in Britain needs and deserves. This is a comprehensive Bill which, once implemented, will represent the biggest upgrade in employment rights for a generation. It will raise the minimum floor of employment rights, raise living standards across the country and provide better support for those businesses who are engaged in good practices.

#### BENEFITS OF THE EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS BILL

This is a pro-worker, pro-business plan. The Government will tackle head-on the issues within the UK labour market that are holding Britain back. The plan to make work pay sets out a vision for modern and fair employment protections that will set the country up for the future.

#### *Supporting families*

Many businesses already provide good, family-friendly conditions for their workers because they know that doing so improves productivity, morale, and retention. This Bill will increase the baseline set of rights for employees with parental or other caring responsibilities, enabling more working parents to get on at work, and achieve a better work-life balance—whether that is raising children, improving their own wellbeing, or looking after a loved one with a long-term health condition. Businesses will gain too where this boosts increased workforce participation, helping employers fill vacancies. Measures will increase the likelihood of a request for flexible working arrangements to be granted, introduce day one entitlement to paternity leave and unpaid parental leave, and introduce a statutory entitlement to bereavement leave.

Despite existing protections, we know it is not always a level playing field, and too many women are being held back at work. By expanding gender pay gap reporting requirements, requiring large employers to produce action plans on how to address their gender pay gaps and support employees through the menopause, and strengthening rights for pregnant workers and new mothers, this Bill will put gender equality front and centre of our employment legislation. These measures will support women's employment participation and tackle the gender pay gap.

#### *Improving rights and addressing one-sided flexibility*

Too many workers experience low-paid, insecure and poor-quality work. This Government believe that all workers should be able to enjoy fair rights, benefits and security in the workplace, no matter who they work for. The Government intend to support businesses so they are no longer undercut by those with low standards. By introducing day one protection from unfair dismissal (while allowing employers to operate probation periods), increasing protection from sexual harassment in the workplace, ending unscrupulous fire and rehire and fire and replace practices, strengthening rights and requirements for collective redundancy consultation, and banning exploitative zero hours contracts, we will raise the bar for workers and provide a baseline of security in work. The plan to make work pay sets out a vision for better, modernised, and fairer employment protections that will set the country up for the future.

#### *Improving take home pay and conditions at work*

We have already made progress in championing fair pay by changing the Low Pay Commission's remit to take into account the cost of living for the first time. The Bill will go further, introducing powers to create a fair pay agreement in the adult social care sector, and reinstating the School Support Staff Negotiating Body. We will also be reinstating and strengthening the two-tier code for public sector contracts, helping ensure that employees working on outsourced contracts will be offered terms and conditions no less favourable to those transferred from the public sector. We will strengthen statutory sick pay, removing the lower earnings limit to make it available to all employees, and removing the waiting period so that SSP is paid from the first day of sickness absence.

#### *A better enforcement system*

While the vast majority of employers champion the spirit of good business and workers' rights, some fall short. By bringing together the various agencies and enforcement bodies that enforce employment rights into the new Fair Work Agency, we will ensure that where employers are not doing what is right, a simplified and strengthened enforcement system will protect workers and ensure justice in the workplace.

#### *Voice at work*

This Government believe that workers should have a voice at work, and trade unions are essential for tackling insecurity, inequality, and low pay. That is why this Bill will focus on strengthening the rights of trade union representatives and bring archaic and prohibitive trade union legislation into the 21st century. We are bringing forward multiple measures to protect workers from dismissal and blacklisting for trade union activity, ensure workers understand their right to join a trade union, to simplify the statutory recognition process, and to bring in a new right of access for union officials to meet,



represent, recruit, and organise members in workplaces. As previously announced, we will repeal the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act 2023 and the Trade Union Act 2016.

The plan to make work pay was developed through close engagement with business and trade unions, and we are committed to continuing with this approach through full and comprehensive consultation on the implementation of the plan.

#### *Next steps to make work pay*

The Government are committed to implementing their plan to make work pay in full. Not all the commitments within make work pay require primary legislation to implement; in many areas the Government have existing powers to deliver on commitments through secondary legislation and non-legislative means. In addition, the Government have been clear that some parts of the plan will take longer to review and implement. In order to provide Parliament, workers and business clarity on how Government intend on delivering on the plan, we are today publishing the “Next Steps to Make Work Pay” paper. This sets direction and gives businesses and workers confidence in our long-term programme of work. Work is already under way to prepare consultations on several aspects of the plan.

As is typical with employment legislation, further detail on many of the policies in the Bill will be provided through regulations after Royal Assent. We expect to begin consulting on these reforms in 2025, seeking significant input from all stakeholders, and anticipate this meaning that the majority of reforms will take effect no earlier than 2026. Reforms of unfair dismissal will take effect no sooner than autumn 2026. We will continue working with partners right up to implementation. Advice and support will be available to businesses to support this.

The Government will continue to work hand in hand on these changes with business, trade unions and civil society in a spirit of partnership to get Britain moving again.

[HCWS117]

### **Office of Trade Sanctions Implementation**

**The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds):** Today, the Department for Business and Trade launches the Office of Trade Sanctions Implementation. OTSI is a new unit equipped with enhanced powers to strengthen the implementation and enforcement of trade sanctions. Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the UK imposed sanctions against Russia on an unprecedented scale. These sanctions have deprived Russia of more than \$400 billion since February 2022. On one estimate, that is equivalent to four more years of funding for the invasion. The creation of OTSI will help ensure that the UK’s trade sanctions regimes have maximum impact.

The Trade, Aircraft and Shipping Sanctions (Civil Enforcement) Regulations 2024, which come into force on 10 October 2024, grant OTSI new civil enforcement powers, which complement His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs’ existing powers to enforce trade sanctions. While HMRC continues to be responsible for enforcement in relation to goods and technology that cross the UK border, OTSI will lead on the enforcement of:

- the provision or procurement of sanctioned services;
- moving, making available, or acquiring sanctioned goods outside the UK (where a UK person is involved);

- transferring, making available or acquiring sanctioned technology outside the UK (where a UK person is involved);
- providing ancillary services to the movement, making available or acquisition of sanctioned goods outside the UK (where a UK person is involved); and
- providing ancillary services to the transfer, making available or acquisition of sanctioned technology outside the UK (where a UK person is involved).

The Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation in HM Treasury remains responsible for enforcement of the oil price cap, alongside its implementation of financial sanctions.

With this new enforcement toolkit, OTSI can impose civil monetary penalties and has powers to request, share, and publish information about sanctions breaches. There are also new reporting obligations for financial services, money services businesses and legal service providers. These will help OTSI to detect and investigate suspected breaches.

A key part of ensuring UK sanctions are effective is improving compliance. As well as tackling breaches when they occur, OTSI is being established to help UK businesses comply with their obligations under UK trade sanctions, through engagement with industry and by providing information and guidance. OTSI will also deliver the sanctions licensing function for stand-alone services, including professional and business services.

The Department for Transport will lead on civil enforcement in relation to aircraft and shipping sanctions. The Trade, Aircraft and Shipping Sanctions (Civil Enforcement) Regulations 2024 also confer powers on the Secretary of State for Transport to request and share information, impose a civil monetary penalty, and to publish information about a breach of aircraft or shipping sanctions where a penalty has, or could have been, imposed. The legislation also places obligations on certain persons to report known or suspected breaches to DFT.

The UK’s sanctions framework was severely tested by the unprecedented scale and scope of the sanctions we have imposed on Russia since 2022. This step change in how we use sanctions revealed areas which required further strengthening, including the need for civil enforcement powers for certain trade sanctions breaches. This Government are committed to maximising the effectiveness of UK sanctions, including through significantly strengthening our sanctions enforcement tools. Launching OTSI and equipping it, and DFT, with an enhanced enforcement toolkit demonstrates that commitment.

[HCWS121]

### **CABINET OFFICE**

#### **Infected Blood Compensation Authority: Independent Member Appointments**

**The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds):** I should like to inform the House that I have appointed three interim non-executive board members to the Infected Blood Compensation Authority under part 3 of the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024:

- Russell Frith, appointed as an interim audit and risk board member, effective from 1st October 2024 until 1 October 2025;
- Deborah Harris-Ugbomah, appointed as an interim commercial board member, effective from 1st October 2024 until 1 October 2025; and

Paula Sussex, appointed as an interim digital and data board member, effective from 1st October 2024 until 1 October 2025.

Sir Robert Francis KC, the interim chair of the Infected Blood Compensation Authority, has also appointed three interim non-executive board members:

Sir Robert Behrens, appointed as an interim community engagement board member, effective from 1st October 2024 until 1 October 2025;

Helen Parker, appointed as an interim community engagement board member, effective from 1st October 2024 until 1 October 2025; and

Gillian Fairfield, appointed as an interim medical board member, effective from 1st October 2024 until 1 October 2025.

These short-term appointments will support the Infected Blood Compensation Authority to deliver compensation to people who are infected and affected in a timely manner. An open and fair recruitment process will commence in 2025 to fill these posts substantively.

The Government are absolutely committed to acting on the findings of the infected blood inquiry and today's announcement is progress towards that collective aim. I will continue to update the House as we progress work to deliver long overdue compensation to people infected and affected as a result of the infected blood scandal.

[HCWS116]

## ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

### Long-duration Electricity Storage Consultation: Government Response

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks):** This Government are committed to making Britain a clean energy superpower. I am announcing a further important step in enabling this mission: a decision to introduce a cap and floor regime to support investment in the next generation of long-duration electricity storage assets.

Our national mission to achieve clean power by 2030 and accelerate to net zero will require the capability to store energy when it is abundant to be used when supply is scarce. LDES technologies, which include pumped storage hydropower as well as new, innovative solutions like liquid air energy storage, are designed to store large quantities of excess electricity, such as that generated by solar and wind during periods of high output, and then supply it back to the grid over periods of several hours or days when it is most needed.

Low carbon long-duration flexibility technologies such as LDES will be pivotal in meeting and maintaining our clean power needs as electricity demand grows. LDES will also diversify our technology mix, giving us greater resilience. And by using renewable energy that can be stored, LDES can help the UK move towards energy independence. Analysis commissioned by Government found that in the central scenario, 20 GW of LDES resulted in electricity system savings of £24 billion by 2050. This represents a saving to consumers of 3.5% of the total system costs.

However, despite the clear benefits of LDES and the potential for significant expansion, it has been almost 40 years since any meaningful new sites were commissioned. This is partly due to uncertainty faced by investors in committing to these complex, long-term projects that have high upfront costs despite having low operating

costs. In January 2024, under the previous Government, a consultation was published exploring the introduction of an LDES cap and floor investment mechanism. Today I am announcing the publication of the Government response to this consultation, in which we set out our decision to introduce a cap and floor investment mechanism.

A cap and floor mechanism is an established way to provide investor confidence and enable investment decisions to be made by project developers. It does this by providing revenue protection—via the revenue floor which is set at a low level—while offering benefits to consumers in return by regulating revenue via the revenue cap. A similar approach has been used successfully to deliver several critical electricity interconnector projects—cables that allow us to trade electricity with overseas markets—without a revenue floor ever being triggered. We are also announcing that Ofgem has agreed to expand its role in regulating LDES assets, by becoming the investment framework delivery body for LDES, building on its existing role and expertise in already delivering the cap and floor mechanism for electricity interconnection projects.

I would like to thank stakeholders who have taken the time to respond to the previous consultation. My officials will continue working at pace alongside Ofgem to facilitate Ofgem implementing the investment framework as soon as possible. Following this response, we expect the publication of a technical decision document this winter, along with documents by Ofgem as the LDES regulator and investment framework delivery body. We intend for Ofgem to be able to open the investment support scheme to applications from LDES developers in 2025.

[HCWS119]

## ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

### Cambridge Waste Water Treatment Plant Relocation: Development Consent Order Extension

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed):** This statement concerns the application made under the Planning Act 2008 for the proposed development by Anglian Water for the Cambridge waste water treatment plant relocation project.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make his decision within three months of receipt of the examining authority's report unless exercising the power under section 107(3) to extend the deadline and make a statement to the House announcing the new deadline. The Secretary of State received the examining authority's report on the Cambridge waste water treatment plant relocation development consent order application on 12 July 2024 and the current deadline is 12 October 2024.

The deadline for the decision is to be extended to 12 January 2025 to allow additional time for Department officials to conduct further consultation on emerging planning policy and analysis of responses to the consultation.

The decision to set a new deadline is without prejudice to the decision on whether to grant development consent.

[HCWS122]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### Baby Loss Certificates Extension

**The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth):** My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Patient Safety, Women's Health and Mental Health (Baroness Merron) has made the following statement:

I wish to inform the House that an extension to the baby loss certificate service has been launched.

The baby loss certificate service is a voluntary scheme to enable parents who have experienced a pre-24 weeks baby or pregnancy loss to record and receive a certificate to provide recognition of their loss if they wish to do so.

Until this extension, this service was only open to parents who experienced a loss since 1 September 2018. We are removing this eligibility restriction so that the service is now available for all historic losses, with no backdate, as well as future losses.

The baby loss certificate service is not a compulsory certificate; it will remain the choice of all parents how they wish to manage the difficult time around a loss. Its introduction was a recommendation from the independent pregnancy loss review published in July 2023, which examined the impact on families of not being able to formally register a baby or pregnancy loss before 24 weeks gestation. So far, over 50,000 certificates have been issued.

Following this announcement, eligibility will now be:

Either parent (i.e., mothers, fathers, surrogates) who have experienced a pregnancy loss through miscarriage, ectopic/molar pregnancy or termination for medical reasons at less than 24 weeks gestation (i.e. up to 23 weeks plus six days gestation), or pre-28 week baby loss (i.e. up to 27 weeks plus six days gestation) for losses prior to October 1992.

Parents resident in England.

Parents who have experienced a historic pregnancy loss or experience a future pregnancy loss.

Parents aged 16 years and over.

Ensuring this important service is available for all losses, regardless of how long ago the loss was or when it may occur in the future, demonstrates this Government's commitment to delivering personalised and compassionate care for women, and support for parents who have suffered a baby loss.

[HCWS123]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### Forensic Information Databases Strategy Board: Annual Report 2023-24

**The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson):** I am pleased to announce that I am today publishing the annual report of the forensic information database strategy board for 2023-24. This report covers the national DNA database and the national fingerprints database.

The strategy board chair, DCC Ben Snuggs, has presented the annual report to the Home Secretary under section 63AB(7) of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984. Publication of the report is a statutory requirement under section 63AB(8) of the 1984 Act as inserted by section 24 of the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012.

The report highlights the continued fundamental importance of fingerprints and DNA in solving crimes and the key part these biometrics play in bringing offenders to justice, keeping the public safe and preventing harm to potential future victims. I am grateful to the strategy board for their commitment to fulfilling their statutory functions.

The report has been laid before the House and copies will be available from the Vote Office. It will also be available on gov.uk.

[HCWS120]

## PRIME MINISTER

### Cabinet Committees

**The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer):** Today I am publishing a Cabinet Committee list. I have placed a copy of the new list in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS118]



# ORAL ANSWERS

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**not later than  
Thursday 17 October 2024**

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