

**Thursday
14 November 2024**

**Volume 756
No. 45**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 14 November 2024

House of Commons

Thursday 14 November 2024

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Budget: Impact on Farming Communities

1. **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the autumn Budget 2024 on farming communities. [901137]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): The Labour Government have committed £5 billion to the agricultural budget over the next two years—the biggest budget for sustainable food production and nature recovery in our history. It is good for British farming, it is good for the country, and it should be welcomed by the Opposition.

John Lamont: This week, the president of the National Farmers Union of Scotland, Martin Kennedy, said:

“The new UK Government’s first budget...hammered hard-working family farms and crofts with crippling tax bills”.

The Minister has accused the Conservatives of scare-mongering about Labour’s family farm tax. Is the National Farmers Union of Scotland also scaremongering?

Daniel Zeichner: I talk regularly to the National Farmers Union of Scotland. I respect it fully, but I genuinely say, as I have said on many occasions, that we need to look closely at the figures and look at the detail. We will find that the vast majority of farmers in this country will be fine.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): The Minister’s response to my hon. Friend’s question highlights his arrogance on this issue. He constantly keeps saying that we need to look at the detail, yet his Department and the Treasury disagree on how many farms will be impacted by as much as 40%. In fact, as he knows, the figures being repeatedly regurgitated by the Government consider only past claims for agricultural property relief, not those combined with business property relief, which is just as important. Why? Because the Treasury does not have the data. We need comprehensive detail on this policy to properly understand the impacts of his family farm tax. I ask this for a third time in this House: will he release a full impact assessment—yes or no?

Daniel Zeichner: We seem to be discussing this endlessly. The figures on agricultural property relief are absolutely clear. I have kept asking people to look at the detail, because what they will find—listen to the tax experts and the people who have actually looked at the policy in detail—is that fewer than 500 farms will be affected. That is the reassuring message that the Conservatives should be conveying to British farmers.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Britain’s farmers, who feed us and care for our environment, deserve better than the betrayal they received under the last Conservative Government, and better than the attacks in this Government’s recent Budget. In Cumbria alone some 1,400 family farmers, many of whom live on less than the minimum wage, will be hit by this tax, but the more immediate threat to farming is the Government’s rash decision to cut the basic payment by 76% next year. That will hit livestock farmers, upland farmers and dairy farmers, and destabilise the whole industry. Will the Minister think again?

Daniel Zeichner: The changes we have made this year are the biggest boost to sustainable farming that this country has seen—that is the agricultural transition. The Liberal Democrats have always been flaky on this issue, and they have never been able to make up their minds what they think about it. We are determined to tackle the extreme climate crisis globally; they seem to think it is not happening.

Fly-tipping

2. **Rachel Taylor** (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): What steps he plans to take to help tackle fly-tipping. [901138]

7. **Sarah Coombes** (West Bromwich) (Lab): What steps he plans to take to help tackle fly-tipping. [901143]

10. **Chris Bloore** (Redditch) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help tackle fly-tipping in rural areas. [901146]

12. **Leigh Ingham** (Stafford) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help tackle fly-tipping. [901150]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): May I begin by wishing His Majesty the King a very happy birthday? I am sure the sentiment is echoed on both sides of the House.

Fly-tipping has increased after years of Conservative failure, leaving a plague of dumped rubbish across our streets, parks and cities and imposing huge costs on taxpayers and businesses. This new Labour Government will end our throwaway society and stop the avalanche of rubbish filling up our streets by increasing recycling rates, reducing waste and cracking down on waste crime.

Rachel Taylor: In 2022-23, North Warwickshire borough council recorded 912 incidents of fly-tipping and took 172 investigation actions, yet only one fixed penalty notice was issued. This meant that farmers often picked up the cost of removing the problem, and criminal

gangs were allowed to get away scot-free. Does the Minister agree that more must be done by the council to prosecute incidents of fly-tipping?

Mary Creagh: I can tell my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour that local authorities have the power to issue fixed penalty notices—on-the-spot fines—of up to £1,000, but one fixed penalty notice is completely inadequate given the scale of the problem she outlined. The low rates of fixed penalty notices and prosecutions mean that this is a consequence-free crime. We are on a mission to improve that, and I hope her council will work with us to improve its record.

Sarah Coombes: Sandwell Litter Watch does a great job of keeping our streets clean, but it and the council cannot overcome the selfish behaviour of fly-tippers, who dump rubbish all over the borough, from Yew Tree to Oldbury. Incidents of fly-tipping in Sandwell are now double the national average. Will the Minister set out further how the Government are working with councils to catch and punish these dreadful fly-tippers?

Mary Creagh: I pay tribute to Sandwell Litter Watch, and to Destination Barr Hill in my constituency, who get out and about every weekend to clean up other people's mess. We will crack down on fly-tipping, establishing clean-up squads and forcing those who dump rubbish or vandalise our fields to join in the clean-up. The National Fly-Tipping Prevention Group has produced a guide on how local authorities can present robust prosecutions to support tougher sentences. The Government will also explore further options with the Ministry of Justice's sentencing review.

Chris Bloore: I am afraid that I have to add to the litany of terrible statistics about fly-tipping in rural areas: there were over 1,500 incidents of rural fly-tipping in my constituency of Redditch, with only one fixed penalty notice given to an offender. Can the Minister tell us more about how she hopes to work with local authorities like mine to ensure that the people committing these crimes are brought to justice?

Mary Creagh: I understand that my hon. Friend's council has just changed political colour, so I hope that the new Labour administration will take the problem a lot more seriously. I am aware that waste permit exemptions allow low-risk waste activities to be carried out under a registration scheme, and that that can be abused by criminals. Let us not be under any illusion: there is serious organised crime in this area. I am considering proposals to tighten the regime, and I am happy to speak to my hon. Friend's council about how we tackle this together.

Leigh Ingham: Fly-tipping is a growing concern among residents of Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages. Many constituents are increasingly frustrated with the persistent illegal dumping of waste. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how her Department is cleaning up the mess left by the last Government and how the proposed measures will directly address fly-tipping and improve the situation for my constituents?

Mary Creagh: I am aware of some serious incidents in my hon. Friend's constituency, including one where a significant amount of rubbish was fly-tipped on a driveway

near a school and pupils suffered bad health impacts. I am concerned that the carrier, broker and dealer regime that the last Government left is far too weak and not fit for purpose. I am actively considering how the regime can be reviewed, and I will be happy to meet my hon. Friend to hear her input.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is nice to see the hon. Lady back in the House and elevated to a Government position—well done. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency has revealed that it has cleaned up some 306 illegal waste sites in the last two years, with taxpayers footing the bill of half a million pounds—equivalent to 15 nurses' wages. What discussions has the Minister had with the Minister in the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs back home in Northern Ireland about the cost associated with fly-tipping?

Mary Creagh: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks. I met his colleague from DAERA at an inter-ministerial group in September. I am aware of the concerns in rural areas about fly-tipping, which blights swathes of our countryside. I am working with the National Farmers Union and others through the National Fly-Tipping Prevention Group to promote good practice, including on private land. We know from the national waste crime survey that 86% of landowners and farmers have been affected by this terrible crime.

Food Security

3. **Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC):** What steps he is taking to improve food security. [901139]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): The hon. Lady will know that there are many facets to food security, but the £5 billion budget settlement for the next two years sends an important message to food producers about the stability and continuity they can look forward to. Our work on supply chain fairness will add to that, and we will be making more announcements in the coming weeks and months.

Ann Davies: Today, the Chancellor is hailing the benefits of free trade in a plea to Donald Trump. However, any future trade deal with the United States will enable cheap food, such as hormone-treated beef, to flood our markets, which would be devastating for farmers and food security. Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to rule out any trade deal that undermines our British farmers?

Daniel Zeichner: We have always been very clear that we will do nothing in trade deals that would undermine this country's important standards.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): Food security is national security, and underpinning it are farmers and farmland. Labour's ill-judged and heartless family farm tax will put all of that in jeopardy: family farms lost; tenant farmers unable to continue farming; communities hollowed out; rural mental health damaged; and precious food-producing land lost to developers or investors. No farms, no food. No farmers, no food. Will the Government please now admit that they have got

this catastrophically wrong? Will they do the right thing by reversing this farm tax to protect our country's food security?

Daniel Zeichner: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place. Let me say once again that it is important to treat this subject carefully. We must look at the facts and listen to people who know about it. I was asked earlier by someone else whether this measure was wrong, but we should look at what Paul Johnson of the Institute for Fiscal Studies and other tax experts have said. There are many ways in which this can be managed, and I encourage the hon. Gentleman to join me in reassuring British farmers about their future.

Flood Resilience

4. **Dr Allison Gardner** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): What progress the floods resilience taskforce has made on protecting at-risk communities from flooding. [901140]

14. **Andrew Pakes** (Peterborough) (Lab): What progress the floods resilience taskforce has made on protecting at-risk communities from flooding. [901152]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): I am sure the whole House will join me in expressing sympathy with the communities of the Valencia region and across Spain following the dreadful flooding.

This Government's floods resilience taskforce marks a new approach by national, regional and local government, and by flood risk partners, to better co-ordinate flood preparedness. It met on 12 September, with 40 attendees from 27 organisations agreeing actions including sharing learning from recent floods. This Government will invest £2.4 billion over the next two years to improve flood resilience by maintaining, repairing and building flood defences. Yesterday, at the Association of Drainage Authorities conference, I announced that we will allocate a further £50 million to the internal drainage boards.

Dr Gardner: I also send my best wishes to the citizens of Valencia and the surrounding region.

As the Secretary of State knows very well, the village of Upper Tean is frequently affected by flooding and sewage discharges. After visiting the Environment Agency, it was suggested that the parish council should set up a flood action group to help to tackle the causes and prevent further impacts of flooding. Will the Secretary of State and the Minister responsible for flooding meet me to discuss the support they can offer to the village in setting up a flood action group?

Emma Hardy: I was delighted to hear that the village is proactively setting up a flood action group. Of course, I appreciate the wonderful work that my hon. Friend is doing to support the village. The Government fully support collaboration between risk management authorities, including local Environment Agency teams and local communities, and we are committed to hearing from people on the ground via the new taskforce. Of course, I would be happy to meet them.

Andrew Pakes: I welcome my hon. Friend's answer. We talk a lot in this House about extreme weather and flooding, but we do not talk enough about the vital role

that our internal drainage boards play in protecting and keeping safe our agricultural land and farming. I welcome the Government's inclusion of the internal drainage boards on the taskforce, and I welcome the money that the Minister put into the system yesterday. That is in stark contrast with the first actions of the 2010 Conservative Government, who cut flood defences by a horrifying 27%.

Will the Minister join me in congratulating the work of my internal drainage board and outline how she will work with it in future?

Emma Hardy: I was delighted to speak at the Association of Drainage Authorities conference yesterday, to champion its work and to announce that, after listening to it very carefully, we will provide £50 million over two years—*[Interruption.]* In answer to the chuntering, the first part has already been spent.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Many of my constituents who live south of Salisbury are concerned about the interaction between flood risk assessments and new house building. Will the Minister assure the House that her work is fully integrated with the Government's house building plans so that people can be reassured that, when land is designated for building new homes, flood risk is properly taken into account so that house building is restricted if there are no mitigations in place?

Emma Hardy: The right hon. Gentleman is right about the importance of ensuring adequate flood protection when we build new homes. Yesterday, we announced a review of the flood funding formula. We will be looking at nature-based solutions and sustainable urban drainage systems, so I hope that offers him some reassurance.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I associate myself with the Minister's remarks about the flood victims in Spain.

Flood victims in Tenbury Wells were concerned to see in the Budget Red Book that capital spending on flood defences is under review. Will the Minister tell the House whether the bid that she will be making to the spending review for flood defences will be higher or lower than it is currently?

Emma Hardy: The hon. Lady and I have met many times to discuss the issue of flooding. I can reassure her that we will be investing £2.4 billion over the next two years to improve flood resilience by maintaining, repairing and building flood defences.

Water Pollution

5. **Manuela Perteghella** (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): What steps he is taking to help tackle unlawful discharges of sewage into waterways by water companies. [901141]

16. **Phil Brickell** (Bolton West) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help prevent water pollution by utility companies. [901154]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): I welcome the new shadow Ministers to their place—as well, of course, the returning one. Under the previous Government, water companies got away with discharging record levels of sewage into our rivers, lakes and seas, leaving them in an appalling

polluted state. That is why we are taking immediate action to place the water companies under special measures, with legislation going through Parliament right now that will ban the payment of unfair bonuses to water company executives. We have also launched a commission that will lead a root and branch review of the entire sector, so that we can clean up our waterways for good.

Manuela Perteghella: In my constituency of Stratford-on-Avon, the River Avon and its tributaries have been heavily polluted by untreated sewage discharges. We know this because of a citizen science project, which sees residents testing for pollutants regularly along the rivers and brooks. Their efforts are supported by community initiatives such as SafeAvon and groups like Stratford Climate Action. Will the Government commit to and resource a national environmental monitoring strategy to better understand the overall health of water bodies, and will they commit to requiring water companies to monitor volumes as well as duration of storm overflows?

Steve Reed: The hon. Lady is quite right to be concerned about the state of the River Avon. We want to move towards a catchment-based approach to water, so we can look at all the inputs and be clear about how we can clean them up. Her point about monitoring will be considered by the commission led by Sir Jon Cunliffe. I hope that she and other colleagues will make their submissions to Sir Jon for his review, which is due to conclude in 2025.

Phil Brickell: I wholeheartedly welcome the Water (Special Measures) Bill as a package of reforms to end the systemic dumping of sewage into our rivers, lakes and seas by water companies, while huge sums are being paid out by the same firms to shareholders. However, laws are only ever as good as their enforcement, and effective enforcement requires adequate resourcing. Will the Secretary of State consider how the enforcement agencies might be self-funding to a degree, with money raised from fines levied on polluting water firms reinvested into the likes of the Environment Agency?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend makes an important point. He will be reassured to know that precisely the points he raises will be brought into law in the Water (Special Measures) Bill, which will soon be arriving in the Chamber, so that polluters will pay for further enforcement action. That way we have a virtuous circle to help clean up our waterways.

Government Support for Farmers

6. Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the National Farmers Union on the adequacy of Government support for farmers. [901142]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): As the hon. Gentleman would expect, I have regular meetings with all the key stakeholders, and I speak to the National Farmers Union on a regular basis.

Dr Mullan: My local NFU representative, Gillian van der Meer, makes clear her concerns and those of many other local farmers about the impact of Labour's family

farm tax. I find it extraordinary that the Minister seems to think that, even if we accept his figures, it is okay that hundreds of farms will be affected. I appreciate that a U-turn can be difficult in the Westminster bubble, but I find the public are much more understanding and would welcome the Government realising that they have got this wrong. Does he agree that they have got this policy wrong and that it is time for a rethink?

Daniel Zeichner: What I would say is that I have had more meetings with Tom Bradshaw over the past few weeks than I have had for a long, long time, for reasons that are entirely obvious. I was grateful to him for congratulating the Government on getting a very good financial settlement for farmers when he addressed the egg and poultry industry conference on Monday in Newport, Wales. I was grateful that he recognised that.

Nature-friendly Farming

8. Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): What steps he plans to take to support nature-friendly farming. [901144]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): I point the hon. Lady to the extraordinary transformation that is under way, with the huge amount of extra money going into the sustainable farm incentive and our environmental land management schemes this year. It is the biggest transformation on record.

Ellie Chowns: I recognise the very welcome shift towards nature-friendly farming, which offers environmental, social and economic benefits—not just nature protection, but good healthy food and good jobs—yet the farmer-led Nature Friendly Farming Network argues that the agriculture budget needs to be more than doubled to £6 billion a year. Will the Minister press his Treasury colleagues to put more money into nature-friendly farming to secure a sustainable future for UK farming?

Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her support for the transition that we are undertaking. In fact, I was speaking to Martin Lines from the Nature Friendly Farming Network only yesterday evening. He and many of his colleagues are delighted with the transition that we are making, but, as ever, the Greens' grasp of economics is limited.

Crustacean Die-off

9. Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): What recent progress his Department has made on investigating crustacean die-offs along the north-east coast in 2021. [901145]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): An independent expert panel reviewed the 2021 crustacean die-off event and published its findings last year. It could not identify a clear single cause for the crustacean mortality. The Government are keeping the situation under review and a coastal health programme was recently established to improve coastal monitoring.

Mr Brash: The die-off on the north-east coast has devastated an industry that has served Hartlepool for generations. Fishermen, such as my constituent Stan Rennie,

and their families want three things: support in the face of their livelihoods being decimated; a plan to repopulate and rebuild their industry; and, finally, answers to how this happened in the first place. Will the Minister meet me and fishermen from Hartlepool to discuss a way forward on this issue?

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend is a passionate defender of his community. I extend my sympathy to all those who find themselves under pressure when these kind of events happen and I would be very happy to meet him to discuss the matter further.

International Trade Agreements

11. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that future international trade agreements support the farming sector. [901148]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): Supporting farmers is a priority of this Government. We have been clear that we will protect farmers from being undercut by low welfare and low standards in trade deals. We are also working to reset our relationship with our European friends to strengthen ties and tackle barriers, and helping boost trade to the EU through a UK-EU sanitary and phytosanitary veterinary agreement.

Bill Esterson: Some farmers benefited from international trade agreements under the previous Government. Unfortunately, it was mostly Australian and New Zealand farmers, not British farmers, who benefited. Will my hon. Friend confirm that this Government will prioritise British farmers who want to export, not least those who want to export to the European Union, through a veterinary agreement with the EU?

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that what happened to the British farming industry was one of the great betrayals of the previous Government. Those trade deals did no credit to our country, but we will take a different approach and develop a much more constructive relationship with our near neighbours. Therefore, the answer to my hon. Friend's question is yes.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): There will be small point in protecting farmers in international trade agreements if Government policy is undermining those same farmers domestically. How many thousands of farmers will it take to clog up Parliament Square next Tuesday before the Government realise that their inheritance tax policy is very deeply flawed?

Daniel Zeichner: Once again, I direct right the hon. Gentleman back to the figures from the Treasury, which show that the numbers affected are under 500. That is the answer to his question.

Water Sector Commission

13. **Ms Polly Billington** (East Thanet) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure that the independent commission on the water sector regulatory system strengthens regulation. [901151]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): The independent commission on the water sector was launched on 23 October and will be chaired by Sir Jon Cunliffe. It is the biggest review of the industry since privatisation and will report next summer. It will focus on boosting investability, speeding up the delivery of water infrastructure and cleaning up our waterways.

Ms Billington: Southern Water is responsible for blighting beaches with raw sewage along Ramsgate, Margate and Broadstairs, yet it plans on increasing household bills by 73% over the next five years, and the chief executive officers of Southern Water have received £4 million over the last five years in bonuses and salaries. Will the new independent commission do something about this egregious situation?

Steve Reed: I congratulate my hon. Friend on campaigning for her local water consumers. She is right to point to the wide failings across the system. We have charged Sir Jon Cunliffe with leading a commission that will look at how we can completely reset the sector—regulation, governance and how the sector operates—so that the levels of pollution and failure under the previous Government can never be repeated.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): In 2013, the previous Government introduced a rebate of £50 per household on the water bills of customers in the far south-west. With 3% of the country's population paying to keep a third of our bathing beaches clean on lower-than-average salaries, will the Secretary of State please reconsider the decision to scrap that rebate for constituents such as mine, which was quietly announced just before the recess?

Steve Reed: It is important that support is targeted at the most vulnerable, so we will look at what more can be done through social tariffs to support families who are at risk of being unable to pay future water bills. It is right that we prioritise the poorest.

Topical Questions

T1. [901182] **Dr Becky Cooper** (Worthing West) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): As we have heard this morning, the public are rightly furious about the filthy, polluted state in which the previous Administration left our rivers, lakes and seas. That is why there is such strong support for the Water (Special Measures) Bill, which is working its way through Parliament. I urge all Members to make submissions to Sir Jon Cunliffe's review, and to encourage their constituents to feed in to it. This is our chance to conduct a root-and-branch review of the entire sector to ensure that it is fit for the future and will properly serve both consumers and the environment for decades to come.

Dr Cooper: Research estimates that as many as 170 dolphins and other mammals are caught and killed every year off the Sussex coast, yet no bycatch data is recorded. Will the Secretary of State please outline how

he is ensuring that supertrawlers operating in UK waters are fulfilling their legal duty to report marine mammal bycatch to the Marine Management Organisation?

Steve Reed: Vessels are, of course, already required to report marine mammal bycatch. We are looking at implementing remote electronic monitoring on larger vessels to gather better data about fishing activities. We are also working to improve our marine environment by ratifying the biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction agreement, enforcing fishing restrictions in marine protected areas, and ensuring that all catch limits are set sustainably.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I wish His Majesty the King a very happy birthday.

The Chancellor, the Secretary of State and the Food Minister claim that their family farm tax will affect only a quarter of farms, yet after informed questioning by the National Farmers Union, the Country Land and Business Association, the Tenant Farmers Association and Conservative Members, the Minister has now admitted that the Government need to check their figures. Should the cost of the family farm tax to farming families not have been checked before the Budget?

Steve Reed: The data from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs is crystal clear: three quarters of farmers will pay nothing as a result of the changes. Family farming will continue into future generations, as it should.

Victoria Atkins: The Secretary of State perhaps needs to ask his Food Minister why he said at the Agricultural Industries Confederation conference that the Government are checking the figures. Let me help the Secretary of State out. He can explain the veracity and accuracy of his figures next week, when thousands of farmers come to Westminster to rally against the family farm tax, the delinking of payments, the hike in national insurance and other tax hikes on working farms in the Budget. Will he come?

Steve Reed: It is very important that the Government listen to farmers, and of course we will do so, but I know that farmers are reasonable people. They will want to look at the facts and, like everybody else, if they drill into the HMRC data they will see that three quarters of them will end up paying no more under the new system than they do today.

T4. [901185] **Tom Rutland** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): Sewage spills are a scourge for my residents, and not just in the sea but in the street too. Raw sewage and used toilet roll flooded a street in Southwick recently. What are the Government's plans to force the water companies to upgrade their infrastructure and bring an end to those foul, smelly spills that are blighting the lives of local residents?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend raises an important point. He is a strong campaigner in his constituency against the failings of the water company and the high levels of pollution resulting from the failures of the previous Government, so I know that he is backing the Water (Special Measures) Bill that is working its way through Parliament, and that he will support Sir Jon

Cunliffe's commission, as we seek to reset the sector by changing its regulation and governance so that it works better for consumers and the environment.

T2. [901183] **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): The puffins and other native seabirds in my constituency on the Isle of May were very grateful for the ban on sand eel fishing and trawling, but that ban is now subject to legal challenge. Will the Secretary of State commit to fighting that legal challenge?

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): The hon. Lady raises an important question. That is a delicate issue because it has been raised by the European Union, but we are absolutely determined to maintain our position.

T5. [901186] **Dave Robertson** (Lichfield) (Lab): I welcome the record allocation for agriculture in the Budget. However, the simple fact is that that agriculture budget is no good if it stays in the Whitehall coffers. Last year, there was a £300 million underspend in the agriculture budget, worth more than £1,400 on average for every single farm holding in the country. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to guarantee that every single penny of that budget gets to communities such as Lichfield, Burntwood and the villages?

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is extraordinary, given all the sound and fury from the Opposition, that they did not even spend the money that was available. This Government will ensure that every penny we have gets to farmers, because we are on the side of British farmers, rather than whipping them up in the kind of irresponsible way that the Conservative party has been doing.

T3. [901184] **Edward Morello** (West Dorset) (LD): Family farms across West Dorset fear closure as a result of the Government's planned changes to agricultural property relief and business property relief, and I urge Ministers to rethink the policy. The Budget also included the announcement of a UK carbon border adjustment mechanism to be introduced on 1 January 2027. That will place a carbon price on goods imported to the UK, including fertiliser. A carbon tax on fertiliser will only increase the cost of production for farmers struggling to compete with cheap imports, and drive up costs for consumers. What assessment has been made of that?

Daniel Zeichner: The proposal for a carbon border adjustment mechanism was supported by the previous Government, and we have confirmed it. It is complicated in the way it will work, and it will not affect people before 2027-28. The Liberal Democrats have shown once again that when it comes to environmental issues, they cannot be trusted.

T7. [901188] **Michael Payne** (Gedling) (Lab): Residents in Woodborough village have faced the devastation of flooding far too many times in recent years. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State therefore work with me, Woodborough flood action group and Woodborough parish council to bring forward a much-needed flood alleviation scheme for that village?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): Protecting communities from flooding is a top priority. That is why we have launched the flood resilience taskforce and are investing £2.4 billion over this year and the next to improve flood resilience. We have also announced another £50 million investment into the internal drainage boards. I commend my hon. Friend for his work with local flood action groups, and I am keen to hear how the matter progresses throughout this Parliament.

T6. [901187] **Mr Lee Dillon** (Newbury) (LD): Last year, the River Lambourn suffered 266 sewage spills from storm overflows, causing irreversible harm to a rare chalk stream. Will the relevant Minister meet me urgently to discuss plans to address that in Newbury?

Steve Reed: I can certainly ensure that the relevant Minister meets the hon. Gentleman. I hope that he will also feed his views into Sir Jon Cunliffe's review, as Sir Jon will be considering catchment-wide approaches that will better protect chalk streams.

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State update the House on progress in creating three new national forests, and, as it is my birthday, may I extend to him an invitation to visit Macclesfield forest in my constituency?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): I wish my hon. Friend a very happy birthday, and I join him in celebrating the 75-year anniversary of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. That pioneering Labour Government created groundbreaking laws so that every citizen could have access to nature's beauty. We will protect that access, and we will set up three new national forests—and who knows where they will be?

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): In our increasingly volatile world, I am sure the Secretary of State will agree that food security is of growing importance to our national resilience. I hope he will commit the new Government to continuing to publish the annual food security index, with the next update coming at next year's farm to fork summit.

Steve Reed: It is a pleasure to take a question from the distinguished former Prime Minister. We are reviewing the data that we can publish, and we want to be as open and transparent as possible. I think that is good for the sector and good for scrutiny, but we will announce in due course precisely how it will operate.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), for coming back to me about the River Hipper scheme, which is of huge importance in my constituency. May I invite her to come to Chesterfield to meet people affected by the flood and see the Holymoorside scheme, which could make a real difference?

Emma Hardy: It is always a pleasure to work with my hon. Friend, and I know how passionately and well he campaigned for his community during the last

floods, and how deeply the situation moved him. Of course I would be more than happy to continue to work with him.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I congratulate the Secretary of State, and indeed the Chancellor of the Exchequer, on the achievement of the Budget: in 23 years in this House, I have never seen such a degree of unity among farming organisations in their response to it. One point on which there seems to be no disagreement is that the removal of the ringfence around agricultural payments to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is a bad move. Nobody asked for it. Why did the Government do it, and what do they expect to achieve with it?

Steve Reed: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have announced the biggest Budget for sustainable farming—£5 billion over the next two years—in the history of our country, and that is to be welcomed by everybody in the sector and everybody who cares about it. This is a Government who believe in devolution. We believe that devolved Administrations should have the right to take decisions about their own countries. The consequentials mean that the appropriate level of funding will continue to go to those devolved Administrations, and our support for devolution means that the devolved Administrations will take their own decisions about the best way to spend it.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): Chester zoo, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Chester North and Neston (Samantha Dixon), does important and nationally leading conservation work. Zoos nationwide have faced regulatory uncertainty for nearly three years because of the previous Government's delay in publishing new zoo standards. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State set out when the Department plans to publish the updated version of the standards of modern zoo practice, to drive improvements in animal welfare and provide certainty to those institutions?

Mary Creagh: I have visited Chester zoo and seen the wonderful work that it does in species conservation. I will endeavour to write to my hon. Friend to update him on the regulations.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): The Government have justified their inheritance tax changes for farmers on the basis that they are concerned about people gaining short-term tax advantage by buying agricultural land. May I therefore ask whether, instead of the sweeping changes that they made, the Government considered an approach that would limit the IHT exemption to those who could demonstrate that the family farm had been in family ownership for a certain number of years? If that approach was explored, why was it not pursued? If it was not explored, why not?

Daniel Zeichner: We have had a lot of debate about this issue, and I am perfectly happy to have discussions with hon. Members about the tax regime in general. One of the beneficial aspects of this policy may be to get the generational shift that farming in this country

needs so much. There are many parts to this policy. It is a complicated policy, and in future we will have further discussions.

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): On 2 and 3 November, a massive burst water main in my constituency left 8,000 homes without water for more than 12 hours. The response of the water company, South Staffs Water, was slow, ineffective and secretive. Will the Minister remind South Staffs Water, and all water companies, of their responsibilities to help residents and work with local stakeholders following an incident?

Emma Hardy: What a tireless champion my hon. Friend has been in campaigning on this issue. She is quite right to feel offended by the poor level of communication she has had from the water company, and I hope that it hears the message loud and clear that water companies need to work with, and communicate more effectively with, Members of Parliament in the areas that they represent.

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Reform): This week, John McTernan, an adviser to Tony Blair, publicly stated that farming should be treated in the same way that Margaret Thatcher treated the miners, and that it was an industry the country could “do without”. As a farmer, I find this incorrect, offensive and deluded. Does the Minister agree?

Steve Reed: Yes.

SOLICITOR GENERAL

The Solicitor General was asked—

Violence Against Women and Girls

1. **Sarah Coombes** (West Bromwich) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help increase prosecution rates for cases in relation to violence against women and girls. [901170]

5. **Will Stone** (Swindon North) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help increase prosecution rates for cases in relation to violence against women and girls. [901177]

The Solicitor General (Sarah Sackman): This Government are committed to halving violence against women and girls in the next decade. We are not only fixing the foundations of our economy, but rebuilding trust in our criminal justice system, with an additional £49 million in the Budget for the Crown Prosecution Service. This will mean additional specialists in rape and serious sexual offences, boosting investigators to tackle those awful offences.

Sarah Coombes: Last year, over 3,000 women in Sandwell were victims of domestic abuse. Getting cases through the justice system quicker is vital to breaking the cycle of abuse and protecting victims, so can the Minister set out further what the Government are doing to make sure the police and prosecutors work together to tackle domestic abuse?

The Solicitor General: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that very important point, and for the work she is doing in this area. For too long, victims of domestic

abuse across the country have been let down, but this week, we have welcomed a new domestic abuse joint justice plan between police and prosecutors. That plan will see them working more closely together to support victims, in order to deliver swifter investigation and justice for all.

Will Stone: Prosecutions and convictions for domestic abuse plummeted over the last eight years under the previous Government. Additionally, the time taken to charge domestic abuse cases has increased dramatically. Given the alarming rise in delays, what measures is the Solicitor General implementing to expedite those processes and ensure timely justice for victims?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend raises a powerful point. He is right that between 2016-17 and 2023-24 the number of domestic abuse flagged cases received from the police by the CPS dropped by nearly 36%. We are beginning to see a rebound in those figures, but much more needs to be done. We need a whole-system approach to fix the system, and our domestic abuse joint justice plan will ensure that the CPS and police work more closely together to address those delays from the very outset of a case.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I have been contacted by a constituent who had concerns about how they were treated in a rape case, and about the communication that came from the police and the CPS. What steps is the Solicitor General taking to ensure victims are properly informed all the way through?

The Solicitor General: I thank the hon. Member for his question, and I am sorry to hear about that specific case. I am of course happy to make contact directly with any local chief Crown prosecutors to address that case. More generally, victim transformation work is taking place across both police and CPS, such as investment in victim liaison officers to make sure that there is a single point of contact so that victims are supported right the way through the criminal justice process.

Mr Speaker: I welcome the shadow Solicitor General to the Front Bench.

Helen Grant (Maidstone and Malling) (Con): Thank you very much indeed, Mr Speaker. It is an honour to stand at the Dispatch Box again, albeit on the other side of this great Chamber. I hope to work constructively with the hon. and learned Lady on this challenging and very intricate part of Government.

Violence against women and children is abhorrent and inexcusable. It crushes self-confidence and self-esteem in victims, wrecks families and ruins lives. As someone who was a family lawyer for 23 years before coming to this place, I welcome the Government's mission to halve violence against women and girls within the next decade. To achieve that important goal, what action are the Government taking on prevention and early intervention, and when will the specialist rape courts be introduced?

The Solicitor General: I welcome the shadow Solicitor General to her place. She brings enormous experience, not only in legal matters but specifically in relation to violence against women and girls, and I look forward to working constructively with her in this area. I also take

the opportunity to welcome the appointment of the new shadow Attorney General, and send my best wishes to the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) as he departs his role.

In answer to the hon. Lady's question, she is right that the commitment to halve violence against women and girls in the next decade is a cross-Government initiative. Prevention and early intervention are a core part of that; that is why when the VAWG mission board met earlier, there was a real focus on education—how we educate about consent and early intervention, so that we can prevent these cases from entering the criminal justice process.

Helen Grant: The Government have announced an extra £49 million in funding to support victims of crime and say that the funding will enable additional staff recruitment at the specialist rape and serious sexual offence unit of the Crown Prosecution Service. Can the Solicitor General confirm to the House the number of additional staff to be taken on? When will they be in place?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady is right to welcome the additional £49 million, which will be invested in those specialist rape and serious sexual violence units in every CPS area, but it is important that the CPS has discretion over how that money is spent and makes sure that resources are directed and targeted at areas where they are most needed, so that we can deliver for the victims of these most serious crimes.

Rural Crime

2. **Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): What steps she is taking to help ensure the effective prosecution of rural crime. [901171]

The Solicitor General: The Government are deeply committed to addressing the important issue of rural crime; that is why we are strengthening neighbourhood policing in rural areas and implementing stronger laws to prevent farm theft and fly-tipping. In addition, we are recommitted to their being a specialist Crown prosecutor in each CPS area who supports the police in charging and prosecuting rural crime.

Olly Glover: I thank the Solicitor General for her answer. The Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023 had support from across the House in the previous Parliament. The statutory instrument to bring in its measures is with the Home Office but has yet to be brought forward. Property seized by the Thames Valley police rural crime taskforce across South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse since the start of 2023 is valued at more than £400,000, with an incalculable impact on farmers' mental health, wellbeing and anxiety. To improve the rate of prosecutions for rural crime, will the Solicitor General urge her colleagues at the Home Office to bring that statutory instrument before the House?

The Solicitor General: I thank the hon. Member for raising an important point. I can confirm that we are committed to implementing the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act and, with that, bringing about real benefits and impacts for farmers suffering from the theft and resale of high-value equipment, with all the stress and distress that that causes.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I am pleased to see the Solicitor General, a good friend of mine, in her place.

A key part of rural crime, particularly in Newcastle-under-Lyme, is waste—waste crime has blighted the lives of my constituents for far too long. May I urge the Solicitor General to do all she can, working with colleagues across Government, to hold the rogue operators of landfill sites to account and make sure that they face the full force of the law?

The Solicitor General: In a previous life I was an environmental lawyer, so I know just what a scourge those waste offences can be. That is precisely why the work of specialist Crown prosecutors, who work closely with the police in charging and prosecuting such rural crime, will be so important.

Covid-19 Fraud

3. **Jack Abbott** (Ipswich) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions she has had with the Crown Prosecution Service on ensuring the effective prosecution of covid-19 related fraud. [901172]

The Solicitor General: The Government are doing everything possible to recover the millions in public funds lost to covid-19-related fraud. The Crown Prosecution Service is working closely with investigators to pursue all those who dishonestly lined their pockets with Government money.

Jack Abbott: In 2021, the previous Health Secretary said in relation to covid-19 contracts that

“where a contract is not delivered against, we do not intend to pay taxpayers' money”.—[*Official Report*, 23 February 2021; Vol. 689, c. 758.]

Judging from the figures that highlight the enormous scale of covid-19-related fraud, that was little more than a promise made and a promise broken by the previous Government. I am pleased that our Government have made it a priority to recoup as much of that money as possible from scammers who profited at taxpayers' expense. However, four and a half years on from the first lockdown, my constituents in Ipswich, many of whom sacrificed so much during the pandemic, will be wondering why it has taken this long, and a change of Government, to take the issue as seriously as it deserves. Can the Solicitor General tell the House whether that is down to the previous Government's incompetence or lack of effort, or whether it is symptomatic of their more general recklessness?

Mr Speaker: Order. One of us has to sit down, and it is not going to be me. That was a very long question; the hon. Gentleman could have shortened it. He might want to apply for an Adjournment debate on the subject, which is obviously very important.

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend raises an important point. In contrast to the previous Government, this Government are taking action on covid-related fraud. We have heard from the Chancellor that she will be appointing a covid corruption commissioner, who will review and assess all the PPE contracts that were entered into before any are written off. I think I speak on behalf of all our constituents in saying that where money was fraudulently obtained, we want our money back.

Serious Fraud Office

4. **Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support the Serious Fraud Office in tackling economic crime. [901173]

6. **Patricia Ferguson** (Glasgow West) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support the Serious Fraud Office in tackling economic crime. [901178]

The Solicitor General: This Government are committed to cracking down on fraud. That is why we have confirmed an additional £9.3 million in funding to improve the performance of the Serious Fraud Office further, enhancing its case management and ensuring better systems for asset recovery.

Joe Powell: I welcome the additional money for the Serious Fraud Office. My hon. and learned Friend will know that Transparency International has assessed the UK as having reduced enforcement of foreign bribery measures for the first time, and the last bribery investigation to be publicly confirmed was in 2020. What steps are being taken to ensure that the SFO actively fulfils its role as the primary enforcement body for foreign bribery?

The Solicitor General: I acknowledge my hon. Friend's proud track record in highlighting economic crime and his work in exposing dirty money. I met the director of the Serious Fraud Office yesterday in this House. We are working closely together to crack down on corruption, fraud, and bribery, and I assure my hon. Friend that the SFO is working incredibly hard in that area.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): In 2023-24, more than 16,000 crimes involving fraud were committed in Scotland. Since crime of that kind is often committed online and observes no borders, will the Solicitor General advise the Chamber on whether the UK and Scottish fraud offices are co-operating on that issue?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is correct to say that so often these terrible crimes do not respect borders. Fraud that is specific to Scotland is investigated by Police Scotland and prosecuted by the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, which works closely with English-based agencies and the SFO where it is appropriate to do so. This Government are committed to strengthening the Union, and that extends to law enforcement in this area.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I warmly welcome my hon. Friend the shadow Solicitor General to her post—it is good to see her back—and I thank the Solicitor General for her kind words.

I equally warmly welcome the advent of a “failure to prevent” offence in relation to certain kinds of economic crime. The Solicitor General will agree that the purpose of that exercise is not to engender further prosecutions but to change behaviour. Will she therefore reassure the House that she will work with colleagues across Government to ensure that businesses receive all the advice they need about how to put in place the reasonable anti-fraud measures that will give them a defence under that new offence?

The Solicitor General: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his question. Just this week guidance was published by the Home Office in conjunction with other organisational partners and the SFO in relation to preventing fraud, and that will of course entail working with business to ensure that it is operating as effectively as it can for those who are impacted by fraud, both individuals and businesses alike.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Not so long ago a TV programme—I think it was “Panorama”—showed that dirty money and bribery was moving from Latvia to Germany and Northern Ireland, and it clearly showed that international criminal gangs and paramilitary groups are working together. Has the Solicitor General had an opportunity to discuss how better to tackle those gangs, for instance by working better regionally, or by working together with the Republic of Ireland to ensure that we combat those groups?

The Solicitor General: I cannot comment on any specific cases, but I know from my discussions with the director of the SFO that it is alive to those cross-jurisdictional issues. That is part of the purpose of the additional investment that the Government have provided to the SFO to ensure that its processes, investigations, and case management are as effective and nimble as they can be, including in tackling those cross-jurisdictional issues.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): I welcome the Solicitor General to her place, and I very much look forward to working with her. I echo the comments of others welcoming the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Maidstone and Malling (Helen Grant), to her place. The Solicitors Regulation Authority recently labelled the Legal Services Board's damning report into the handling of the Axiom Ince fraud as merely an opinion. Can the Solicitor General clarify what mechanisms are in place to ensure that the regulator is properly regulated? What actions are being taken by her Department to prevent similar economic crimes to ensure that all constituents, including mine in North Cornwall—one of whom is in the Gallery today—can have confidence in our legal system?

The Solicitor General: I welcome the hon. Member to his place. He raises an incredibly important point. This Government in general are committed to raising standards and rebuilding trust in the justice system. That means regulators working effectively with investigators in the public interest. He will know that, in accordance with long-established practice, it would not be proper for me to comment on the specific case that he mentions, but I can assure him that we will be working to ensure that regulators are working effectively with investigators in the public interest.

Victims' Right to Review Scheme

7. **Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): What steps she has taken with the Crown Prosecution Service to ensure that the victims' right to review scheme is operating effectively. [901179]

The Solicitor General: The victims' right to review scheme is a vital mechanism for ensuring that victims have the right to request a review of certain prosecutor decisions, either not to start a prosecution or to stop a prosecution. We are continuing to work with our partners, including the CPS, so that the victims' right to review scheme operates as effectively as possible to deliver for victims the justice they rightly deserve.

Catherine Fookes: In my short time in this place, I have been shocked and concerned by the rates of violence against women in my constituency of Monmouthshire. Many constituents have reached out to me for support. I am pleased that the Government are aiming to halve violence against women and girls in the next decade, but can the Solicitor General tell us what proportion of violence against women cases request reviews? How are victims supported through the process, because it is incredibly difficult to maximise their ability to exercise their right to review?

The Solicitor General: We are looking at the victim's right to review scheme closely. It is informing the subject discussions that I hope to have later today with the Director of Public Prosecutions. We are also working closely with the Victims' Commissioner, who is raising issues around how we might reform this process. I can assure my hon. Friend that the CPS is looking at this matter closely. One thing it is introducing is that where no evidence is offered for the most serious rape and serious sexual offences, that decision is reviewed by a deputy Crown prosecutor before it is taken. That oversight is already producing results.

Street Crime

8. **Dan Aldridge** (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with regional mayors on rates of prosecution for street crime. [901180]

9. **Harpreet Uppal** (Huddersfield) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with regional mayors on rates of prosecution for street crime. [901181]

The Solicitor General: Council leaders and regional mayors play an important role in tackling the unprecedented challenges that this Government inherited. We are committed

to working closely with local leaders to deliver the safer streets that our communities deserve. I have already met several deputy mayors, mayors and council leaders to discuss these important matters, and we will continue to do so in the months ahead.

Dan Aldridge: Shoplifting is a major concern for my constituents, businesses and retail workers in Weston-super-Mare, many of whom have contacted me for support. Shoplifting has increased massively, with more than 1,000 cases these past 12 months. That is a 31% annual increase. To reassure my constituents, can the Solicitor General outline what steps she is taking to prosecute those responsible for shoplifting?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to raise this important issue. Shoplifting is a scourge in many of our constituencies. That is why this Government are committed to introducing respect orders and beefing up legislation to tackle persistent antisocial behaviour. We are also working with the CPS to ensure that we clamp down on assaults against shopworkers, which will be part of a new stand-alone offence, and we are re-committing to prosecuting in these core areas.

Harpreet Uppal: The Solicitor General will be aware of concerns about knife and violent crime in many communities, including Huddersfield. In particular, there are serious concerns about how children and young people are being criminally exploited in wider county lines gangs. How is the Department working with regional mayors to improve prosecution rates for knife and violence-related offences, and to ensure that those at risk of offending receive targeted interventions?

The Solicitor General: As my hon. Friend states, knife crime is a scourge that particularly impacts on young people, too many of whom senselessly lose their lives or are injured every year. Mayors and councils will be essential partners in the mission to achieve safer streets. I have already met the deputy Mayor of West Yorkshire to discuss this matter. The prosecutorial piece is part of this Government's review to crack down on the sale of offensive weapons. The Government are in a hurry. We have already implemented a ban on the possession of zombie-style knives and machetes, but of course there is a lot more that we can and should be doing.

Council Tax

10.34 am

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con) (*Urgent question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government if she will make a statement on the Government's policy on council tax referendum thresholds in 2025-26.

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): Since the 2012-13 financial year, local authorities, fire authorities, and police and crime commissioners have been required to determine whether the amount of council tax they plan to raise is excessive. The Secretary of State sets thresholds on excessiveness and knows the referendum principles for different classes of authority. Since 2016-17, those thresholds have also included a social care precept, providing higher thresholds for authorities with social care responsibilities.

Decisions on the council tax levels to set, or whether to hold a referendum to go beyond the referendum principles, sit with councils. But the Government have been clear that we expect the threshold to be maintained at the current level, set by the previous Government. The Office for Budget Responsibility forecast of the last Government assumed that council tax would increase by a 3% core, plus an additional 2% for local authorities with adult social care responsibilities for the entirety of the forecast period. We will set out further details in the local government finance settlement in the new year.

Beyond that, we are determined to support local government and undo the mess that has been created over the past 14 years. That is why at the Budget we announced over £4 billion in new local government funding, including an additional £1.3 billion in the local government finance settlement. That, as the hon. Gentleman will be well aware, has been warmly welcomed by the sector.

David Simmonds: Council tax funds about £20.5 billion of expenditure in England on social care, which is 61% of all council funding. It is therefore of huge interest to our constituents. The Prime Minister and Ministers have repeatedly told the House that we need to wait for the spending review and the local government finance settlement to know what will happen with the referendum limit, including at the Dispatch Box yesterday when the Prime Minister told my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition to wait. Shortly afterwards, the press were told that the 5% limit would remain in place.

Answers to parliamentary questions show that the Government are expecting spending power to increase by £3.7 billion, funded by grants of £1.3 billion. That demonstrates that the Chancellor's Budget has opened up a £2.4 billion black hole in council finances. In addition to that, the County Councils Network has highlighted its concerns that although we have not yet had a formal statement in the House, there are proposals to change the way in which funding is allocated, further depriving local authorities in urban, suburban and rural areas of the funding that they need.

I would like to put two questions to the Minister. First, will he promise the House that funding allocations through the grant mechanism will follow the cost pressures

on local authorities and not any other form of indexation or formula, to ensure that places facing the highest costs receive the funding that they need? Next, while nobody would want to see the referendum limits scrapped simply to bail out central Government, the announcement of the 5% constrains local authorities when it comes to their fundraising. Will the Minister tell the House whether it will be our high streets through increased business rates or whether significant cuts to other council services will be needed to fill the Government's £2.4 billion black hole?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions. Let me take them in turn. The Government are committed to a fair funding settlement for local government. We will set out further details in the usual way in the upcoming local government finance settlement, which will be presented to Parliament.

On the £2.4 billion figure, I am afraid that we simply do not recognise it. I assume that the hon. Gentleman, in his calculations, failed to take account of the over £300 million raised from business rates and £300 million in additional new houses coming along. Yes, it is right that £1.8 billion will be raised through council tax in 2025-26, but, as I made clear, that is because the Government are clear that we are maintaining the previous Government's policy on council tax, in line with the OBR forecast made in March 2024.

The question for the Opposition is: are they saying that the cap should be abolished, as the Conservative Local Government Association group's "Rebuilding the Road to Victory" document called for all caps to be removed, or are they saying that the limit should be reduced, which would be contrary to the policy in place when the now Leader of the Opposition was the local government Minister?

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): It is worth remembering why a number of our local authorities are facing this decision and the tight financial situation: the funding crisis over the past 14 years, forcing a number of local authorities to make those difficult decisions. A number of our areas are facing major in-year cost pressures from things such as temporary accommodation and special educational needs and disabilities provision. Does the Minister agree that we need to accelerate the house building plan in order to get local authorities back on a level playing field, so that our local residents do not see that cost increase in their council tax bills?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for that question. She is absolutely right; after 14 years of the previous Government's record in office, local government is on its knees. We have a system on the verge of collapse. We had multiple years when in-year spending pressures were ignored. The headroom that we have provided through the Budget—more than £4 billion in new local government funding, which I referenced earlier—will allow us to start to turn that system around and to get ahead of some of the challenges we are facing, whether the pressures on adult social care, children's services or homelessness costs as a result of temporary accommodation. That is why our house

building programme—within my specific remit of responsibility—and, in particular, the increase in social and affordable housing supply that we are committed to, is so important.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): The Liberal Democrats are deeply concerned that people are simply paying more council tax for fewer services. That is quite clearly the result of Conservative tax cuts and their failure to tackle social care. As a former council leader, I know that the burden on councils has increased to such an extent that they are forced to make impossible choices. The burden and the costs that councils of all colours have to shoulder as a result of the Conservative Government's policies must be reviewed. Will the Minister ensure that councils do not have to close libraries, cut bus routes and reduce road repairs in order to meet the growing demands of the most vulnerable members of our community? Despite the announcement in the Budget, will the Minister recognise the LGA analysis that councils face a £6.9 billion shortfall because of inflation, increased wage demands and demand pressures on local services?

Matthew Pennycook: The Government certainly recognise the pressures on local authorities and the burdens placed on households as a result of 14 years in which local government was run down. We are determined to turn that situation around, as I have said, by providing the headroom that local authorities need to get ahead of some of the challenges that they have faced for many years. That is why the more than £4 billion in new local government funding announced at the Budget, including an additional £1.3 million in the local government finance settlement, has been so warmly welcomed. That brings the total real-terms increase in core spending to around 3.2%. We remain committed to the 5% referendum cap—we believe that is the right threshold. To protect the most vulnerable, we are also committed to the single-person discount and local council tax support schemes, under which, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware, more than 8 million households do not pay a full council tax bill.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I really do not know how the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), can stand there and talk about cuts and shortfalls with a straight face. We know where responsibility lies—and on the Lib Dem Benches as well. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I think that the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) will want that Yorkshire cup of tea. It will come very quickly if he carries on. I call Clive Betts—another Yorkshireman.

Mr Betts: Let me take my hon. Friend on a trip down memory lane. When I first became a councillor—only 48 years ago—councils had the freedom to raise rates for domestic and non-domestic property. Should we not, at some point, start a conversation with councils and the wider public about whether thresholds at all are appropriate? Councils in this country have less freedom to raise local taxation than virtually any other councils in western Europe. Council tax itself is regressive, both between individuals and between different local authorities. Can we not start that conversation at some point?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank my hon. Friend for that point, and I will relay it to the Local Government Minister. On the general principle, we are determined to rebuild local government from the ground up. That is why we are providing multi-year funding settlements to councils and removing a number of ringfences, and are committed, as I said, to fair funding. On his general point about the Opposition, I completely agree. It reminds me of a phrase my nan used to use: "More front than Harrods," she used to say. That is what Opposition Members have.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Will the Minister rule out additional council tax bands being among any changes that the Government make?

Matthew Pennycook: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that we are not talking about council tax bands in this urgent question; we are talking about the thresholds that remain in place. We are committed to those thresholds. As I am sure you would expect, Mr Speaker, we will set out more details about the local government finance settlement at the appropriate point next year, in the usual way.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Areas like Hull city council were savaged by the previous Government when it came to funding—absolutely savaged, to the point where they were almost on their knees. Will my hon. Friend the Minister tell the House what the Government are doing for areas of high deprivation like Hull?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The damage done to local government over the 14 years in which the Conservatives were in office is profound. We have inherited, as I said, a system on the verge of collapse. We are absolutely committed, as part of rebuilding that system from the ground up, to a fair funding settlement. As I say, the Minister for Local Government will announce more details in the upcoming local government finance settlement in the new year.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Local authorities across the country will welcome multi-year settlements, so they can plan for the future. However, does the Minister have any plans whatever for a revaluation of properties, given that properties were originally valued back in 1992, when council tax began? The hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and I produced a Select Committee report on what could be done to ensure that councils need not be strictly neutral in terms of finance, and could revalue properties to bring valuations up to date.

Matthew Pennycook: The hon. Gentleman tempts me to discuss the local government finance settlement ahead of it being formally presented to the House. I am afraid I cannot do that, but the Government have heard his point, and I will ensure that it is passed on to the Local Government Minister.

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): As a councillor, I saw 14 years of austerity and cuts to local government, and a 93% cut equivalent for my council in Medway. The opposition, the Medway Conservative group, recently stated that it would not only scrap the

[Tristan Osborne]

recent council tax cap, but introduce a local income tax on residents. Does the Minister agree that there needs to be consistency on this issue, whereas the Opposition's approach is to say, in one case, "Scrap the cap," and in another, "Keep it"?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and we still have not had an answer: we do not know the Opposition's position on thresholds. *[Interruption.]* We are in government, as the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) chunters from a sedentary position, and we have confirmed that when it comes to thresholds, we intend to maintain the position as it was under the previous Government, and as baked into the Office for Budget Responsibility forecast for the spending period. The Opposition really do have to answer this question: are they saying that the thresholds should be removed or increased, or are they saying that they should be reduced and core services cut?

Mr Speaker: Unfortunately, it is not for the Opposition to answer the questions—they are in opposition.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): The Chancellor and the International Monetary Fund are known to favour ending council tax and replacing it with a wider property tax. The Welsh Labour Government tried to revalue all the properties in Wales for council tax purposes. Can the Government rule out doing either of those things?

Matthew Pennycook: I am not going to get into speculating about more fundamental reform of the council tax system. As I have in a number of my responses to this urgent question, the Government will set out their position on the thresholds, and on other matters in respect of the local government finance settlement, at the appropriate point early in the new year.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): York is the lowest-funded unitary authority in the country, but has one of the highest costs of living. That puts real pressure on it. We are also among the poorest-funded for health, fire and police services. When the Minister looks at the funding formula for local government, will he look at the presumptions made, to ensure more equity in the way it is put together?

Matthew Pennycook: As I have said repeatedly—I commit to it again—we are determined to ensure that there is a fair funding settlement for local government, and as I have said, more details will be forthcoming in the settlement early next year.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Labour used to say that it would freeze council tax. Can the Minister now confirm that its policy is actually to put council tax up because of the flawed, broken promise on national insurance?

Matthew Pennycook: No, that is not the case. We are maintaining the policy of the previous Government, which, as per the OBR forecast, estimated that £1.8 billion will be raised through council tax. The position of the Government is that it will maintain the thresholds.

If the hon. Gentleman thinks differently, he should tell House what his position is on thresholds: should they be reduced or increased?

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased about the support for first and second-tier councils and the commitment to fair funding, which will make a real difference in, for instance, Cornwall. However, in unitary authorities such as ours, where a great many services have been shared, larger town councils have had to step up and take the strain, but have not had the grants and other measures that have been available to those first and second-tier councils. Could the appropriate Minister meet me to discuss the position of larger town councils in Cornwall?

Matthew Pennycook: I am more than happy to commit the Local Government Minister to a meeting with my hon. Friend.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): During Prime Minister's questions yesterday, the Government accepted that they were giving councils a maximum of £600 million, but the Local Government Association has said that there is £2.4 billion worth of pressure. Does the Minister accept that councils will have to increase their tax by about £1.8 billion to fill the gap between what the Government are offering them and what they need to provide local services?

Matthew Pennycook: As I have made clear, we do not recognise the £2.4 billion figure. It fails to take into account increases that I have already mentioned, such as the £300 million increase in business rates income and the £300 million increase in income from new, additional houses. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we expect council tax to raise £1.8 billion in 2025-26, but that is in line with the previous Government's spending plans and baked into the OBR forecast as of March 2024.

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): As a former deputy council leader, I am somewhat amazed by the collective amnesia of Conservative Members. The hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) spoke of what "constrains" local government spending power. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is 60% cuts, such as those that Southampton city council has suffered for 14 years, that have really reduced that spending power, and does he agree that rather than faux outrage, what we need is an apology?

Matthew Pennycook: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. We deserve an apology, but I doubt that we will get one. Before 2010, it was vanishingly rare for councils to fall into serious financial difficulty. Since then, nine councils have been affected in just 14 years. There is a pattern here. For too long, the Conservative Government not only failed to carry out their duty to local government, but hollowed out frontline services and crashed the economy. We are turning that around with the support that we are providing to local government in the Budget. We will set out more details in the local government settlement early next year, as I have mentioned.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As the Minister will know, although we do not have council tax per se in Northern Ireland, the pressures on our family finances

are on a par with those on the UK mainland. The Government need to be clear about just how much further the finances of average families will be stretched, because this is a very worrying trend. What extra help can families, especially disabled families, expect to receive this year?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, which relates to an earlier one. I think that, in the urgent question, the Opposition failed to account for the various other sources of support that we are providing for families. We are continuing the household support fund—that is £1 billion. There is a £1 billion uplift for special educational needs. There is UK shared prosperity funding of £900 million—the list goes on, but if the hon. Gentleman wishes to discuss the specific conditions in Northern Ireland further, I am more than happy to pass on that request to the Local Government Minister.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association; Opposition Front Benchers might want to reflect on that.

My hon. Friend mentioned front; I could talk about the Opposition's brass neck in talking about concerns about the pressures that local councils face. Does he agree that 14 years of Conservative austerity, initially with the Liberal Democrats, devastated the ability of many councils, including Luton council, to provide much-needed services to families in our constituencies?

Matthew Pennycook: I have been a local councillor, as have many Members of this House. The hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) has been a council leader, so he will know what has happened to the system over the past 14 years. The Opposition continue to claim that there is a multibillion-pound black hole in local council budgets. When asked how they would fix it, however, they said, "It's not for us to do; we're in opposition. It's for the Government." It is a classic policy of having no plan to fix the mess. They have provided no clarity on their position on thresholds, and failed to take responsibility for what they did over 14 years in government.

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): My Conservative-controlled council in the London borough of Bexley had to apply for a capitalisation order three years ago and make 15% of our staff redundant. Despite that, it still overspent its budget every month for over two years, and is currently overspending on the safety valve agreement made with the previous Government. In addition, the Conservative leader of the council, in responding to a question from me last year, accepted that she was part of the LGA Conservative group executive that published a manifesto last year asking their own Government to remove caps on council tax.

Given that, does my hon. Friend agree that it is rank hypocrisy for the Conservative party to complain now about black holes in council finances?

Matthew Pennycook: I absolutely do, and the Government are determined to extract from the Opposition some clarity on their position on thresholds. Do they agree with the LGA Conservative group, which has called for the caps on council tax to be removed? Do they want those caps to be reduced? We are still none the wiser. Hopefully, we can find out in the weeks and months to come.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): As a member of a council for more than 30 years—like other Members of this House, I am still one—I have to say that, in the last few years, I have not met a single councillor from any political party across the local government family who does not believe that local government finance is in its worst state for decades. The latest LGA figures indicate that in Labour authorities, council tax is £276 lower than in Conservative authorities. Does the Minister agree that this shows that Labour councils, the Labour party and the Labour Government provide better value for money?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Labour councils charge less on average than Tory councils, and the councils with the lowest rates of council tax are all Labour. Council tax bills in Labour councils are on average £345 less than in Tory councils. When it comes to local government financing and council tax pressures, people are right to vote Labour. It will ensure that their council tax is lower than if they were under a Conservative local authority.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I am a former local government leader. Does the Minister agree that we should thank local authority leaders, especially Labour leaders such as Pete Marland at Milton Keynes city council, for keeping services during 14 years of austerity? Milton Keynes city council has kept weekly bin collections, kept children's centres open and reduced rough sleeping, while keeping council tax lower than in its neighbouring Tory authorities. Does the Minister agree that instead of using local authority leaders to make cheap political points, the Conservative party should thank them and apologise for 14 years of austerity?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I extend the Government's appreciation to all local government leaders—I mean that in a cross-party spirit—for what they have done to keep services going despite the pressures that they have faced over the past 14 years, when the previous Government ran down local government. We should thank local government leaders, and this Government do. We want to consult them on how we rebuild the system after 14 years of pressure, and we would be more than happy to work across the Chamber and have a mature, cross-party conversation about we fix this mess. That will not happen if the political game-playing from the Opposition continues.

National Insurance Contributions: Healthcare

10.59 am

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will make a statement on the impact of changes to employer national insurance contributions on primary care providers, hospices and care homes.

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I am grateful to the hon. Member for asking this important question. It gives me the opportunity to say to GPs, dentists, hospices and every part of the health and care system that will be affected by changes to employer national insurance contributions that this Government understand the pressures they face and take their representations seriously. The Chancellor took into account the impact of changes to national insurance when she allocated an extra £26 billion to the Department of Health and Social Care. There are well-established processes for agreeing funding allocations across the system, and we are going through those processes now with this issue in mind.

This Government inherited a £22 billion black hole in the public finances, broken public services and a stagnant economy. Upon taking office we were told that the deficit the previous Government recklessly ran up in my Department alone would mean delivering 20,000 fewer appointments a week instead of the 40,000 more we promised. The Chancellor and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State were not prepared to see further decline in our NHS. That is why we put in an extra £1.8 billion to stop the NHS going into reverse this year.

We built on that at the Budget, delivering the significant investment that the NHS needs to get back on its feet, backing staff with investment in modern technology, new scanners and new surgical hubs, and rebuilding our crumbling primary and secondary care estate. Alongside that, we delivered a real-terms increase in core local government spending power of around 3.2%, which will help to address the range of pressures facing the adult social care sector, including £600 million in new grant funding for social care. We are now working through exactly how that money will be allocated, as per normal processes. As the Secretary of State set out yesterday, we will ensure that every pound is invested wisely to deliver the Government's priorities and provide value to taxpayers.

The Department will set out further details on the allocation of funding in due course, including through NHS planning guidance and the usual consultations, including on the general practice contract. As part of these processes, we will consider the impact of changes announced to employer national insurance contributions in a fair and open way over the next five months, before the changes come into force in April 2025.

Dr Evans: I draw the House's attention to my declaration of interests.

Many in the health sector will have been pleased to hear the announcement of the extra funding for the NHS, only for their joy to be struck down by the realisation that a manifesto promise not to raise national insurance contributions had been broken. That was compounded further by the discovery that a raft of frontline care

providers—care homes, hospices, care charities, pharmacies and GPs, to name but a few—will not be exempt from the NI rise, leaving them with crippling staff bills and the threat of closures and redundancies. The hospice sector expects the cost to be £30 million—closures and redundancies. The initial assessment of the cost to GPs is £260 million—closures and redundancies, at the expense of 2.2 million appointments. For the care sector, the changes will cost £2.4 billion, dwarfing the £600 million in social care support that was announced. Does the Minister accept that it is inevitable that council tax will have to rise to support the increase in NICs?

For the first time, the National Pharmacy Association has announced collective action. Its chair said:

"The sense of anger among pharmacy owners has been intensified exponentially by the Budget, with its hike in national insurance employers' contributions and the unfunded national living wage increase, which has tipped even more pharmacies to the brink."

Will the Minister clarify who is exempt from NI? Will the Government admit that they got it wrong and make a change? The Prime Minister, Health Secretary and Chancellor have all said that allocations will be made "in the usual way". Will the Minister clarify what the usual way is? Will mitigations be put in black and white to the House and the public? Is this part of the £20 billion, or new funding?

More importantly, will the Minister lay out a concrete timetable for hospices, care homes, GPs, pharmacists and all other allied health professionals, who are making decisions now? This seems to be another example of a big headline from the Labour party but no detail.

Karin Smyth: Well, really. I am quite dumbfounded by the hon. Gentleman's response. I respect him for his professional practice, and he knows the state of the NHS that we inherited from the previous Government, as reported in Lord Darzi's report. He talks about joy, but there was no joy when we inherited the mess they left back in July. He talks about people being tipped to the brink, and they absolutely were, as Lord Darzi made clear.

As I said, we will go through the allocation of additional funding in the normal process, which will be faster than under the previous Government because we are committed to giving the sector much more certainty. The normal process, as the hon. Gentleman should know from his time in government, is to go through the mandate and the planning guidance and to talk to the sector about the allocations due next April, as I said in my opening statement.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend join me in welcoming the Opposition's new interest in social care? Does she further agree that the problems that social care faces owe more to the previous Government's failure to do anything with Andrew Dilnot's 2011 report than they do to anything that is happening now with national insurance?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. When I joined this House in 2015, I remember that the first act of the new, non-coalition Conservative Government was to take the legs from underneath that social care commitment by postponing the Care Act 2014. They cynically said at the time that they would bring it forward by 2020, which they thought would coincide with the next general election. We all saw how that went.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): The increase in employer national insurance contributions will erode the very investment in the NHS that the Budget sought to prioritise. Katie, a GP from Lindfield in Mid Sussex, wrote to me saying that the NICs increases

“serve to directly undermine access and patient care.”

The Government have promised to recruit more GPs, but hiking national insurance puts that pledge in jeopardy. Surgeries are set to see eye-watering increases in staff costs, equivalent to 26,786 appointments in West Sussex alone. GPs will have no choice but to cut services and staff numbers, and patients will pay the price.

Does the Minister agree that stronger primary care, with faster appointments and fewer people having to go to hospital, is better for both the NHS and patients? If so, will she protect services and press the Chancellor to end this GP penalty?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point about the importance of GPs and primary care to the wider sector. Immediately after taking office this summer, we freed up the system to employ 1,000 extra GPs through the additional roles reimbursement scheme—which the previous Government refused to implement—because we recognised the need for that extra capacity. We will be talking to general practice as part of the contract reforms over the next few months, following the normal process, to determine allocations for next year.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): If this Government’s ambition, stemming from Lord Darzi’s report, is to be realised, significant investment is required not only in primary care but in third sector organisations. However, these organisations are concerned about the increased cost pressures on their services. Will the Minister ensure that there is sufficient support within the trickle-down approach, which the Department will now have to apply, to maintain current service levels and facilitate the urgently needed transition across health services?

Karin Smyth: I respect my hon. Friend’s expertise in this area. She is right, and we understand that the pressures are real, which is why we have committed to supporting the NHS and the social care system with the additional funding that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care secured as part of the Budget settlement.

We are also working closely with the NHS, in a new relationship, to understand its needs. That is a dynamic conversation, because we want to understand what is happening in local systems as we continue to invest in them.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): We all know that a lot of the debate on assisted dying revolves around the lack of hospice places to help people pass in the best way possible. Similarly, much of the debate on the NHS is about the lack of care home spaces. Leaving aside the cross-party name-calling, may I beg the Minister to consider exempting hospices and care homes from this national insurance increase?

Karin Smyth: I understand the right hon. Gentleman’s point. As I have said, we will continue our conversations with all affected providers in the normal way.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the support that we will put in place for general practice and, in particular, the community health hubs that were recently announced, will be crucial to the improvement in the health service that we urgently need?

Karin Smyth: I respect my hon. Friend’s expertise and service to the national health service. He will understand the need to make the shift into neighbourhood health services. We have been clear that we will ensure the NHS spends all its allocations in the most effective way to enable that shift, as part of our 10-year plan.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): A trustee of the Hamelin Trust, a not-for-profit provider of care and support across Essex, has contacted me because he is concerned about the £92,650 rise in national insurance that Hamelin will have to pay because of the measures introduced by the Government. He said:

“This will affect what they can do to support our communities and subsequently put more pressure on the NHS and local authorities. The impact on disabled people and older adults who rely on regular, consistent, high-quality care will be profound.”

I do not believe that the Government intended to hammer the disabled or older people who need care, so will the Minister prove me right and look at the policy again?

Karin Smyth: The right hon. Gentleman was part of the last Government—I am pleased to note that he is talking to his new constituents. The £22 billion black hole and the report from Lord Darzi indicate the fragility of the system we have inherited. We are ensuring that vulnerable groups are supported through the allocations provided to both the Department for Health and Social Care and the Department for Work and Pensions.

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): When Labour came into government in July, every element of our health service was in crisis. Since, then, we have announced record investment in our national health service, but I am yet to hear whether the Conservative party supports that record investment. Does the Minister agree that the Government are listening to health professionals, taking tough decisions and not simply playing politics?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We have still not heard from the Opposition whether they agree with the extra investment that has gone into the sector or with Lord Darzi’s report that diagnosed their legacy, including why they left that legacy and the serious issues we now have to address.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Shooting Star children’s hospice in Hampton serves children with life-limiting conditions and supports their families not just in my constituency but across south-west London and Surrey. With the national insurance hike, it faces a bill of £200,000, on top of all the inflationary costs that it has had to absorb. It is also waiting for confirmation as to whether the children’s hospice grant, which this year provided it with £1.8 million, will continue beyond

[Munira Wilson]

April 2025. Will the Minister commit to making hospices exempt from the NI rise, not just for nursing staff but for all staff, and when will she be able to give Shooting Star and other children's hospices confirmation on whether the children's hospice grant will continue? They need to plan now.

Karin Smyth: I commend the hon. Lady for raising the great work done by hospices. We understand the pressures and the precarious situation that many have been left in after 14 years of the last Government. We are willing and keen to talk to representatives from all types of hospice, and others. We are going through the process of the allocations and we will be able to get back to them as soon as possible.

Mr Mark Sowards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Hundreds of my constituents in Leeds South West and Morley are stuck on record long waiting lists, thanks to the Conservative party. It is essential that we get those waiting lists down, because they have profound effects on our economy and on the health of those waiting. Will the Minister confirm that the measures that we set out in the Budget will provide the additional appointments needed to get those waiting lists down?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. As I said in my response to the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), we faced a situation where we were told that we would have to reduce appointments by 20,000 a week. We have taken serious steps, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State fought hard for our Budget allocation so that we can have 40,000 extra appointments as promised in our manifesto, which was overwhelmingly endorsed by the British public. We are determined that we will bring change to the system and tackle the waiting lists.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): Increased taxes for hospices, care homes, GPs and pharmacies. Is that a deliberate decision by the Labour Government or just a cock-up?

Karin Smyth: We understand the precarious situation that hospices are in—the precarious situation that they found themselves in before we came to power—and we are committed to talking to them and other affected providers. We will be going through the normal process of allocations in the next few months.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): Many of my constituents continue to wait on record-long waiting lists. Does the Minister agree that, before the Opposition throw stones, we should remind the House that their spending plans would have cut £15 billion from the NHS, which would have completely shattered an already broken NHS?

Karin Smyth: Those Conservative Members who have held on to their seats—I have been in that situation as well—know that the public, staff and patients understand exactly what state they left the NHS in. That is why they had such a disastrous election result. We are determined to change the NHS and to make it fit for the 21st century. Part of what we have done in this Budget through that

extra allocation, our conversations with those in the health and social care system and our 10-year plan will do just that.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): While Scotland's public sector is facing a £500 million bill for the Chancellor's reckless national insurance hike, Scotland's charities, including hospices, face a £75 million price tag under these changes. The Budget simply cannot be balanced on the back of Scotland's charities and hospices. This is a disgraceful decision for which the Labour Government are rightly being hounded. There is still time for them to do the right thing and cover these costs—I agree with what the Father of the House said. Will the Minister tell us whether they will do so?

Karin Smyth: The SNP has been in charge in Scotland for something like 20 years now—I forget exactly how long, but it seems like a very long time. Again, the Scottish people gave us an excellent result at the general election, and I am delighted to have so many Scottish colleagues here with me now. However, the SNP has the opportunity to make decisions in Scotland around health and social care as well, so I suggest that they do a better job.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): It is disappointing to put it mildly that the Opposition spokesperson was unable to mention the record funding committed in the Budget.

Dr Luke Evans: It was in my opening line—

Mr Speaker: Order! The shadow Minister has been granted an urgent question. He asks the questions; he does not answer them from the Front Bench.

Karl Turner: Does the Minister agree that it is also disappointing that the Opposition ignore the fact that they completely disregarded and ignored social care when they were in office?

Mr Speaker: The Government have no responsibility for that.

Karin Smyth: Well, I do agree with my hon. Friend. As I have said, when I became a Member of Parliament in 2015, I remember very clearly the absolute shock that I felt when the Conservatives immediately announced that they were not going to meet the commitment that they had made to implement the Care Act 2014 at that time, and we are still playing catch-up on that issue.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Doctors from Duns, Galashiels, Selkirk, Kelso and across the Scottish Borders have contacted me about the impact that this national insurance hike will have on their practices. They tell me that the decision will be a huge retrograde step for primary care, will have a huge financial impact on their practices, and will undermine access to primary and patient care. Why have the Labour Government made this choice to hammer local doctors?

Karin Smyth: As I have said, we have made a commitment to general practice and primary care by releasing extra GPs into the system. We recognise the situation in which

GPs find themselves. I know this because I worked with GP practices in my previous career. We need those practices to be the foundation of our neighbourhood services, which is why we will talk in the normal process about the allocations over the next few months as part of the contract.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): If we are to reform the NHS, we need to move resources over time into primary care. The reality is that GPs see at first instance 90% of patients, but receive only 8% of NHS funding. Will my hon. Friend ensure that, in the settlement that is agreed with NHS providers, particular attention is given to supporting GPs?

On the social care sector, when we help the hospices and social care providers, which are charities and small organisations in particular, can perhaps do so without subsidising some of the hedge funds that are now investing heavily in social care? We do not want to add to their profits while supporting the small charities involved.

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend has led fantastic work in previous Parliaments on the health and social care system, which he understands very well. He makes an excellent point about ensuring that additional funding goes where we want it to, which is towards supporting our constituents, particularly with social care. We have all seen the situation over the last decade over so. Improving that is critical to the urgent and emergency care system, and to the dignity of those people who need the service. We will continue to talk to them, and to local systems, about the impact of any changes.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I hear what the Minister says about the Government wanting to stop the NHS going into reverse, but that is exactly what risks happening to GP practices in my constituency. I met with one on Friday that told me that, as a consequence of having to find extra funds for national insurance contributions, it will no longer be able to make permanent a temporary support post, or proceed with the recruitment of the extra GP that it wanted to take on. There is a contradiction at the heart of the rules: GPs are treated as private contractors, but if they were private contractors, they would be eligible for employment allowance. Because their work is entirely in the public sector, they cannot get it. Surely something has to give.

Karin Smyth: The right hon. Gentleman tempts me to go into my previous career working with GPs and their employment and contractual status, but I will not do that now, Mr Speaker, as you would rightly curtail me. GPs have a complicated contractual status that has been long in the process. We understand the precariousness of primary care. GPs are crucial to our plans for developing the health service, and we will discuss with them, in the normal process, the allocations for the following year.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): Last month's Budget finally gave my constituents hope that there will be an NHS that works for them. Will my hon. Friend assure me that this Government will avoid the sticking-plaster, piecemeal approach of the last Government, and bring forward a long-term plan to fix the NHS for the future?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend is right: getting away from short-term fixes and sticking plasters is exactly what we are attempting to do. That is why we put in the extra security of extra GPs over the summer, committed to extra funding in the Budget, and launched our 10-year plan. I encourage all hon. Members and their constituents to submit their views to that exercise at change.nhs.uk.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Dr Aleksandra Fox of the Ash surgery in my constituency is one of a number of GPs who have pointed out to me the deleterious effects of an ill-thought-through Budget. In addition, charities such as Shooting Star and Demelza children's hospices are facing problems now. They cannot wait for discussions through the normal channels while this cock-up is put right. When will something be done about it, please?

Karin Smyth: The right hon. Gentleman says that it is an ill-thought-through Budget. I do not know whether he agrees or disagrees with the extra funding that the Government have committed to the NHS after the disaster of the last 14 years.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): This morning, we learned that the Scottish Government have wasted £28 million of taxpayers' money on the flawed, ill-conceived National Care Service (Scotland) Bill, which did not command the support of almost any of the stakeholders needed to pass it. Does my hon. Friend agree that the additional funding for the NHS that has been committed to in our Labour Budget should be used to come up with a proper plan for social care across the UK that does not follow the flawed approach in Scotland?

Karin Smyth: I am so pleased to see my hon. Friend in her place. As I said to the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan), the SNP has been in charge of Scotland for a very long time. We have certainly missed having a Scottish Labour voice in this place. She makes an excellent point and shines some sunlight in this place on the actions that have been taken up in Holyrood.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Julia's House hospice does amazing work across Wiltshire and Dorset, but its chief executive Martin Edwards came to Parliament on Tuesday to tell me that the additional national insurance contributions will cost the hospice £250,000 a year. For that hospice, and Naomi House, which does similar good work, the changes are a significant concern. I know that the people of Wiltshire and Dorset will do as much as they can to raise additional funds, but will the Minister reflect on that unexpected gap and offer some reassurance?

Karin Smyth: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that his hospice, and the hospices in many of our constituencies, do great work. We are aware of the precarious situation that they have been in for a number of years, and we want to ensure that they are fully part of end of life care. He will know from his time in the Treasury that there are complicated processes, both in the Treasury and in the Department of Health and Social Care. When I talk about the normal processes for

[Karin Smyth]

allocating money, I think he understands that well. We are mindful of hospices' concerns, and we will continue to talk with them.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): Between 2013 and 2023, during the Conservatives' time in government, the number of general practices fell from 8,044 to 6,419. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a bit rich for the Conservatives to pretend now that they care so much about general practice, given that 1,600 practices closed on their watch?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend brings a great deal of expertise to the House from her work in social care, so she knows and understands the precarious nature of the sector, which we cannot stress enough. I do not know whether the Conservatives have actually read the report by Lord Darzi, but that report and its appendices give a really clear idea and diagnosis of the state in which the NHS and social care system was left. It will take a long time to rebuild it, and the sustainability of general practice and primary care is particularly problematic. That is why we took those actions in the summer, and why we will continue to support them and build up a neighbourhood health service.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The Minister will understand that GPs are private contractors to the health service, as are pharmacists, hospices and many wonderful charities. The Government have decided to ensure that the public sector is protected from the national insurance increase. All that the Minister—or her Secretary of State—needs to do is agree that all the suppliers to the national health service are also protected, which would safeguard their position. Otherwise, care homes will close down, pharmacies will close down, and hospices will not be able to provide their services. My constituency has the wonderful St Luke's hospice, which does brilliant work—I helped to found it back in the 1980s—and which has told me that it will have to reduce services drastically as a result of the changes. Whenever nurses and other medical practitioners get a pay rise, those suppliers have had to cope without being given the money to fund that pay rise. They need to be protected from that as well.

Karin Smyth: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and for supporting his local hospice. He is an experienced parliamentarian; he knows that this is not simple and that the provider landscape is complicated. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), large private equity companies own many social care providers. We want to ensure that any additional funding from the Budget goes exactly where it needs to be: supporting patients—our constituents—where they live and need care. That is why, over the next few months, we will continue to talk to providers in the usual way about the allocation of those funds.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Since the Budget, I have been contacted by GPs, care providers and charities in my constituency, all expressing concern about the impact of the rise in employer NICs on their ability to serve the most vulnerable in our community. Will the Minister reconsider the change by finding a way to exempt the charitable sector in the same way as

the public sector? I have written to Ministers and tabled early-day motions on this issue. Will she take this opportunity to assure the charitable sector that it will not be impacted by the measure?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Lady tempts me to make specific commitments, which I am not prepared to do, as I am sure she understands. She is right that people are expressing concerns about some of these decisions. That is because they are in such a precarious situation as a result of what we have inherited from the past 14 years. As the Prime Minister and the rest of the Government have been clear throughout the election and afterwards, we have a 10-year plan because it will take a long time to fix the foundations and build up the sector to make it more resilient and sustain it for the future. We want to fix those foundations, and we will talk closely with everyone affected over the coming months, but this will take a long time. Those providers are precarious because of the mess that we inherited.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Earlier this week, I received a letter from the Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire air ambulance, a charitable healthcare provider. The national insurance changes will add £70,000 a year to its costs, and if it is forced to close, lives will be lost. May I urge the Minister—I know she will want to protect this service—to do all she can to ensure that that air ambulance and others across the country are not hit by this tax?

Karin Smyth: I assure the hon. Gentleman that since we were elected, the Government have already taken action to secure extra investment in the health and social care system, and we are committed to building a thriving health and social care system for the rest of the 21st century.

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): A rural pharmacy—one of the few remaining in my constituency—derives 90% of its turnover from providing NHS services. Will the Minister consider giving pharmacists for whom NHS services account for such a large proportion of their work an exemption from the NICs rises? What assessment have the Government made of the impact on the continuing delivery of programmes such as Pharmacy First if pharmacists have to shut their doors?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point about pharmacies. We absolutely understand their importance, both in urban constituencies such as mine and in rural areas. I remember from when I became an MP in 2015 the changes that the previous Government made to the pharmacy contract, and I am aware of the precarious situation that pharmacists have been in. We will continue to talk to them as part of the normal process, but we understand how important they are to building a neighbourhood service and to the future of the NHS.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Acorns children's hospice, St Richard's hospice and GPs, care homes and pharmacies across West Worcestershire have all been in touch with concerns about the extra cost burden that the Government have imposed on them. Can the Minister explain how it fits in with her strategic plans to slap extra cost on the community sector while rebating the NHS trust sector?

Karin Smyth: I am sure that all those hospices, which do great work, were also in touch with the hon. Lady when she was part of the previous Government. She will know from her time on the Treasury Committee that following the Budget, we go through the planning guidance and have conversations with all core contracted sectors. That is part of the normal process. We are absolutely committed to building back the foundations of the NHS and social care system, making it fit for the 21st century and creating a 10-year plan to which we want everyone to contribute. Community and neighbourhood systems are a fundamental part of that.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): GPs, pharmacies and social care homes from across Ceredigion Preseli have contacted me to express their concerns about the impact of the policy changes surrounding employer national insurance contributions. It is essential that they are supported with the cost that comes from this policy. The Minister has suggested that there might be additional support for some of them through the usual systems. Will she clarify whether that will mean funding being found from the Department's budget, or whether there will be additional new money from the Treasury? That would have certain ramifications for the Welsh Government and whether they get additional Barnett formula funding.

Karin Smyth: I understand the concerns of the providers that have come to the hon. Gentleman, and he is right to raise them in this place. As he knows, health and social care is devolved to the Welsh Government, and there has been much benefit already from the Barnett consequential of the Budget. We will continue to talk to the devolved regions—in, may I say, a much more co-operative way than the previous Government did—to ensure that we have a good system across the entire United Kingdom.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): In a tweet to the Health Secretary, Caroline Rayment, who is the clinical lead for the Wharfedale and Silsden community partnership, said,

“you came to our practice in June and told us you wanted to support the family Dr. Costs for the NMW and NI will come to approx £50k—we are a small practice of 7000 patients—how is this helping us?”

Can the Minister answer Caroline's question?

Karin Smyth: I am not abreast of all the Health Secretary's tweets and the responses to them, but Caroline makes a point that has been made by many people in the Chamber today, as well as a number of providers. As I said in my opening statement, we understand the precarious situation that those providers have been put in because of the failures of the past 14 years and the £22 billion black hole that the Government have inherited. As my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) said, general practice has been put in a precarious situation over the past 14 years, with thousands of practices going bust and giving back their contracts. That is a situation that we promised the British public we would change, and we will do so.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): In Suffolk, the national insurance increase creates £11 million of additional pressures on adult social care alone. I do not think the Minister understands that she is not just engaged in some party political knockabout with Conservative Members; GPs, hospices, care homes and pharmacies are watching this debate and are looking to the Minister for answers. They know that this problem was caused by the Government's tax rise, which is being implemented without a plan for them, so can she tell them when a solution is going to be brought forward by the Government? When are they going to get reassurance about their future?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Gentleman may or may not think that this is political knockabout, but I was very clear in my opening statement that we understand the pressures that the sector is under. We understand the mess that we inherited, and we are fixing it. We are working with social care, GPs, providers and hospices that are affected by any changes in the Budget, and we will continue to talk to them in the usual way. We are committed to doing this faster than the last Government did it. Under the last Government, planning guidance and commitments to the NHS were always running late—they were always playing catch-up. We are committed to making sure that the sector is much more sustainable, so that it can do the important job we are asking it to do.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. As Members know, I am the last person—when I am called, the debate is almost over.

Will the Minister confirm whether consideration has been given to the fact that the rise in national insurance contributions will not affect the NHS as a whole, as the block grant for us in Northern Ireland will cover it? However, GP practices in my constituency of Strangford will suffer, and unlike high street businesses or manufacturing, they cannot increase prices to cover that impending rise, leaving practices with no option other than to reduce hours in order to stay solvent. Does the Minister agree that this is the last thing already overstretched GP practices need, and will she commit to take this issue back to the Treasury for reconsideration as it relates to healthcare businesses such as GPs, dentists and pharmacies?

Karin Smyth: As the hon. Gentleman knows, health and social care is a devolved issue. We will continue to work closely with all the devolved areas, because we think that that is important, unlike the last Labour Government—the last Conservative Government. *[Laughter.]* I slipped there—I almost got through.

We absolutely understand the precarious nature of general practice and, in particular, I understand the really serious issues around health and social care in Northern Ireland. The hon. Gentleman knows that, and he makes a good case for the sector. We want to ensure that it supports people in Northern Ireland with the good primary and community care they deserve.

Business of the House

11.38 am

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): Will the Leader of the House present the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): The business for the week commencing 18 November includes:

MONDAY 18 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill.

TUESDAY 19 NOVEMBER—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Bill, followed by a general debate on the infected blood inquiry.

WEDNESDAY 20 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Financial Assistance to Ukraine Bill.

THURSDAY 21 NOVEMBER—Debate on a motion on strategic lawsuits against public participation and freedom of speech, followed by a debate on a motion on International Men's Day. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 22 NOVEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 25 November will include:

MONDAY 25 NOVEMBER—If necessary, consideration of Lords message, followed by Second Reading of the Non-Domestic Rating (Multipliers and Private Schools) Bill.

TUESDAY 26 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill.

WEDNESDAY 27 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Finance Bill.

THURSDAY 28 NOVEMBER—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 29 NOVEMBER—Private Members' Bills.

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

Jesse Norman: Thank you very much indeed, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in wishing a very happy birthday today to His Majesty the King.

The last few days in global politics have been extraordinary, featuring one of the most incredible comebacks of modern times. It was wildly hard to predict, many people have panicked at the possible consequences, and some are still in a state of denial—but even so, I must say that I am delighted to have been appointed as shadow Leader of the House of Commons.

I pay tribute to my immediate predecessors: the Luke Skywalker of the Conservative party, my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), and the great Obi-Wan Jedi sabre-wielding master—or mistress—of the Despatch Box herself, the former Member for Portsmouth North, Penny Mordaunt. As it was with the Galactic Empire, so it is with the Labour party. Recent events have reminded us of the truth of the ancient saying: power reveals.

So it is with this new Government. What have their first chaotic few months in office revealed? First, we know that they like to say one thing and do another.

They talk about supporting working people, but the rise in national insurance will hit all working people. They talk about growth, but have imposed the largest tax rise for a generation, pushing up both interest rates and inflation. Only last week, we saw a reported 64% rise in companies filing for insolvency compared with the same week last year—and that is before all the red tape of the new Employment Rights Bill, which will make it harder than ever to give somebody a job and grow a business.

Madam Deputy Speaker, there is so much sheer incompetence here. To take one example, the Government have raised employer national insurance, lowered the income threshold and increased the minimum wage, all at the same time. No one seems to have noticed that the combined effect of those measures is to raise the cost of hiring an entry-level employee not by 2% but by something closer to 12%. That is a terrible blow, especially to the retail and hospitality sector. I ask the Leader of the House: was that deliberate or just a mistake? Will she ask the Treasury to publish an assessment of the total impact of those three measures before any legislation comes to this House?

Secondly, we know that the Government are willing—even keen—to play the politics of division. They have favoured public sector workers over private sector ones. They have driven away entrepreneurs and business creators. As we have heard this morning, they have been punitive on rural areas. The rise in national insurance puts huge pressure on already struggling rural GPs, care homes, dentists, pharmacists and hospices. Mental health and disability charities have already expressed their deep concern. We heard from the Dispatch Box just now that the Government hear the concerns, but if they did understand them, why have they not done anything so far? Why did they not address those concerns in advance?

Meanwhile, the agricultural tax changes will afflict vastly more farming families than the Treasury estimates—families who work all hours, whatever the season, on very low margins. I can see the embarrassment written all over the faces of Government Members, many of whom represent rural areas for the first—and very likely now the last—time.

Thirdly, we know that the Government seem to have zero appetite to take on vested interests or reform our hugely pressured public services. They have shovelled out cash to their union friends, who have been delighted to stick to their fax machines and similarly ancient working practices. What have the Government got in return for all those millions? No commitments to make any efficiencies whatever. Nor do the Government seem much interested in legislation. They have not presented many Bills and the Bills so far have often included not carefully drafted law, but simply a vague and sweeping arrogation of new powers. This is what Governments do when they do not know what to do.

The Government are even hiding behind the very early presentation of a private Member's Bill on assisted dying—one of the most sensitive and complex issues that we face. The Prime Minister himself promised Esther Rantzen in March that he would make time to debate these issues, but yesterday he refused the request of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) to give the Bill more time on Report. Will the Leader of the House now give that commitment?

The astonishing fact is that after 14 years in opposition, the Labour party came into office with almost no real plans. Instead, we have a Government who have already lost their way—a Government with no real sense of urgency, and no positive flavour or theme of any kind. I ask the Leader of the House this: we know what and who this Government are against, but what is this Government for?

Lucy Powell: I also wish His Majesty the King a very happy birthday.

This is Islamophobia awareness month—a chance for us all to come together to tackle all forms of religious and racial hatred. It is also transgender awareness week, which started yesterday, celebrating our trans heroes. It is a chance to remind ourselves that the trans community is one of the most abused, suffers high levels of mental health problems, and is more likely to be homeless or ostracised.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) on his big promotion to the shadow Cabinet. As I said last week, the Leader of the Opposition does indeed love a tryer, and the right hon. Gentleman's many talents are at long last being recognised. I also warmly welcome the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) to his place in what I think is his first ever contribution to Business questions in his quite long parliamentary career. I have to say that there has been a slight upgrade in the jokes in comparison with those of some of his predecessors.

I understand that the right hon. Gentleman is a biographer of Edmund Burke, who is seen as a founder of modern Conservatism and modern politics. As such I am very much looking forward to working with him on the Modernisation Committee and the agenda of modernising this Parliament. I cannot promise him that all our dealings will be quite that highbrow, because I am afraid his responsibilities bring other things with them, and he might find himself getting bogged down with the state of the toilets or complaints about the wi-fi, but I look forward to working with him.

May I take this opportunity to thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill? Many colleagues have asked me about the process, and whether there will be sufficient time for further debate and scrutiny of this important Bill, so perhaps I may take this opportunity to explain further some of the issues around it. I know that people care deeply about this issue, and there are strongly held views on both sides. As such, it is a matter for Members to consider personally and freely. I know from the last debate on this issue held in the House that it can be the best of moments for Parliament, with considered, thoughtful and respectful debate. It is not a Government Bill. Similar issues such as legalising abortion and homosexuality have come about via private Member's Bills in the past, and I believe that is the appropriate way to consider matters of conscience, with a free vote and a neutral Government position.

As the Bill will be the first item of business on 29 November, it is highly likely that the debate on Second Reading will last for the full five hours. That is comparable to proceedings on any other Bill—perhaps longer—and I am sure the House would want that to be the case. Should the House agree to its Second Reading, the Bill would then be considered in Committee, probably

for several weeks. The whole House will also have further opportunities to debate and vote on those matters on Report and again on Third Reading, which will not be until April at the earliest.

The Government have a duty to ensure that any Bill that passes through Parliament is effective and can be enforced. That is why if any Bill is to be supported by the House, we would expect to work with the promoting Member to ensure that it is workable. This is a matter for the House to decide, and the Government will implement the will of the House, whatever it so chooses. I hope that will help Members when considering these issues.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about a number of Budget measures, but I am afraid the cat really was let out of the bag this week, because we finally learned that the Conservative party supports all the benefits that the Budget brings, but does not support any of the measures that will pay for them. We are now seeing a return to the magic money tree economics pursued by his predecessor Liz Truss.

We have had to make difficult choices to balance the books, so that there is no return to austerity and so that we can invest in the economy and renew our public services for the long run. I am afraid that the shadow Leader of the House is scaremongering with a number of the issues that he raises. He will know that more than half of employers will see no change at all or will pay no additional national insurance from this package. He failed to mention the important changes we are making to business rates, which will support many high street businesses. He might want to include that in his future calculations. Charities, GPs and other healthcare providers, as has just been said at the Dispatch Box by my hon. Friend the Minister for Secondary Care, have been put in an incredibly precarious position after 14 years of chronic under-investment and mismanagement by the Conservatives. We will do what we can, and further announcements will be made about the distribution of health funding.

I put on record that the NHS has received its single biggest increase in spending power for many years. Is that something that the shadow Leader of the House supports or rejects? I am not clear what his party's position on the Budget is any more. We have had to make tough choices because of the poisoned chalice and inheritance left by his party. That was once described as a “struggling” economy and “anaemic” growth. Those are not my words, but his.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Many people who have permanent and often worsening medical conditions are rejected when they apply for a blue badge with their local authority. The blue badge scheme helps people who have medical issues—physical or mental—with access to car parking that is closer to their destination. I am aware of a constituent who has dementia and other medical conditions whose application for a blue badge has been rejected by my local council. As such, may I request that we have a debate in Government time on the blue badge scheme in England and how local authorities implement the scheme for residents?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for that important question, which gets raised many times in these sessions. He is right that it is for local councils to decide whether individuals are eligible for a badge, but I will certainly

[Lucy Powell]

make sure that the Department for Transport has heard his question today. I think it would make a very good topic for an Adjournment debate.

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

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): I also welcome the new shadow Leader of the House to his position. I look forward to working with him on the Modernisation Committee, and I join him in wishing happy birthday to His Majesty King Charles. I join the Leader of the House in welcoming Transgender Awareness Week.

The Liberal Democrats welcome the announcement of the Financial Assistance to Ukraine Bill and its goal to use the profits from frozen Russian assets to support Ukraine. My hon. Friends the Members for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller), for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) and for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) met a delegation of Ukrainian MPs this week, and they learned at first hand how invaluable this £2.26 billion would be as Ukraine works to repel Putin's illegal invasion. While that is a positive step, we must also keep an eye on how we support Ukraine at home.

In the UK, we are proud of our support to Ukrainian nationals and, in particular, the Homes for Ukraine scheme. However, some of the relationships between Ukrainians and their British host families have broken down, leaving already struggling local councils to pick up the pieces. To help our ally Ukraine, we must ensure that our councils also have the support they need. Will the Leader of the House seek assurance that this support will be provided to avoid overwhelming local councils and to reinforce Britain's capacity as a safe haven for Ukrainians?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for that important question. We are pleased that we will see Second Reading of the Financial Assistance to Ukraine Bill next week. That important measure will continue our ongoing support to Ukraine, which is unshakeable and long-term. She is right to raise that continued support.

Homes for Ukraine has been one of the best schemes that the country has embarked on. Many families across the country have taken part in it and found great value and purpose in providing homes for Ukrainians. The Government will continue to support councils and others to ensure that that scheme can continue in the long term, for however long it takes, to support Ukrainians while the war is ongoing.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): I have received a number of emails about the winter fuel allowance and access to pension credit, so I have joined forces with accredited organisations to help people access and sign up to pension credit. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is vital that we get as many people as possible signed up to pension credit?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for doing that important work. It is vital that we raise awareness of pension credit and all the support it can bring to those who are eligible not only through the winter fuel allowance but in several other areas. It can make many eligible

pensioners thousands of pounds a year better off. I fully support her endeavours. That is something that the Government have been doing nationally as well.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I am grateful to the Leader of the House for announcing the first Backbench Business of the Session for next week. For the following week, we have offered a debate on the international status of Taiwan—we hope that will take place—and a debate on freedom of religion in Pakistan. Of course, this afternoon in Westminster Hall we have our first allocated debate, on respiratory health, and who better to lead that than the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)?

The Leader of the House mentioned tackling Islamophobia and Islamophobia Awareness Month. We had an application on that and have offered its sponsor a debate next week, but we are yet to hear whether they wish to take that up.

We are developing a queue of debates for the Chamber and Westminster Hall. I urge the Leader of the House to announce business for Westminster Hall when she announces business in future so that we can up its status.

Several hon. Members rose—

Bob Blackman: Just wait a minute. [Laughter.]

This morning, Historic England released a report saying that 599 buildings in London are in danger. That does not cover the rest of the country, but it includes this place. I know that there is a long-term plan to look at what we will do about this place, but will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement to be made by the appropriate Minister on the progress made and how we can bring forward the decision to be made about the place in which we work?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for that. Judging by the themes of the early Backbench Business debates that he has granted for the Chamber and in Westminster Hall, it seems as if the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was at the front of the queue many times! I am sure that will continue, but I encourage other Members to apply for Backbench Business debates too, as they are a really good way of raising important topics on the Floor of the House.

On restoration and renewal, the hon. Gentleman will know that some of that falls on my shoulders and those of my colleagues, including the new shadow Leader of the House, who I am sure will bring much to the table. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that further information will come to the House in the new year, and it will be for the House to decide on the way forward, based on those business plans.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): As it is his birthday today, I call Tim Roca.

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—you have to use every trick you can, don't you? [Laughter.]

In my constituency, many residents are worried about plans for flood alleviation works at Poynton pool, a much-loved beauty spot where local campaigners—the friends of Poynton pool—have raised real issues about the cost and the flawed nature of the underlying rationale.

Will my right hon. Friend please make time to debate how we ensure that communities are properly listened to and that local authorities and the Environment Agency take local views on board?

Lucy Powell: I wish my hon. Friend a happy birthday as well. I am sure he was already aware that he shared his birthday with His Majesty the King, but his is of course a much more important occasion—for this House today, anyway. I thank him for again raising that important matter for his constituents. He has already become an important Member of this place and is continuing to raise issues that affect Macclesfield, and particularly Poynton pool. He will know that community engagement is really important in these matters. I encourage him to raise that further in an Adjournment debate.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I have long campaigned for the Borders railway to be extended from Tweedbank to Hawick, Newcastleton and on to Carlisle. The last Conservative Government, with the SNP Administration in Edinburgh, committed through the Borderlands growth deal to fund the feasibility study to look at that extension. Shockingly, the new Labour Transport Secretary has put this under review. Can the Government make a statement to clarify whether they support this important cross-border transport link?

Lucy Powell: This Government are committed to upgrading our woeful rail infrastructure, which has suffered 14 years of neglect and under-investment from the hon. Gentleman's party. I am afraid that many of the plans, like the one he described, were works of fiction. They were agreed to in theory, but there was no budget line at all given to them in the books. That is why we are fixing the foundations and ensuring that every single commitment we make—

John Lamont: The money was there.

Lucy Powell: The money absolutely was not there in this case. We are ensuring that we can take forward all these rail plans with confidence.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): I wish to ask the Leader of the House about a local issue that I came across recently. I met a young couple who were being evicted from their house through no fault of their own. I appreciate that the Government are taking urgent action to tackle the problem. On the very same street there are a whole series of other housing problems. May we have a general debate on housing, so that we can discuss the range of issues that many residents face, particularly the shortage of housing and the importance of building more council houses and other affordable homes to buy and rent?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. He will know that the much enhanced and strengthened Renters (Reform) Bill, which is making its way through the House, will prevent no-fault evictions such as the one he described. I am really pleased that this Government are taking that forward. I saw the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee nodding along sagely at the suggestion of a broader debate on housing, which the hon. Gentleman may want to apply for.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Lady for the clarity and diligence she showed when dealing with the end of life debate that we will have later this month. She will be aware that there are profound concerns about the length of time for Second Reading, notwithstanding her point, simply because of the number of Members who will wish to participate—I anticipate a very large number indeed. We may see speeches reduced to two or three minutes, which really is not appropriate for a subject of this kind.

The right hon. Lady will also be aware that “Erskine May” is clear that, when nominating Public Bill Committees, “in the case of bills which divide the House on cross-party lines”, it is vital that the Committee of Selection should “have regard” to the composition of the House. In those terms, will she—either now or subsequently if she needs to refer to Erskine May—make absolutely sure that, as the Bill goes through the House, that balance will be retained, so that we get the best possible legislation? Nothing is more important than legislating to make lawful the entitlement to take life.

Lucy Powell: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that question. I took some time in my opening remarks to explain these matters, and I recognise and understand people's concerns. As I said, a Second Reading debate lasting five hours would be longer than that of many substantial Bills. The Second Reading debate on the Online Safety Bill, which was huge and long anticipated for five years, was reduced to just over two hours, because of earlier statements and so on. Five hours is a good amount of time for Second Reading, notwithstanding the points that he raised.

On Committee selection, the right hon. Gentleman is right that, should the Bill pass Second Reading, it will be for the sponsoring Member to put forward names for that Committee. He is right that the guidance on nominating those Members states that that must reflect the party balance in the House, and it should also reflect the balance of views on the Bill. As I said, the Bill would then return to the full House for remaining stages, including Report and Third Reading, which would all have time for debate and a vote.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House will be aware of the news yesterday that 115 post offices could close. That would have a massive impact on our high streets, which are already struggling. The Kennington Park branch in my constituency is one of those facing possible closure, in addition to the Brixton and Vauxhall Bridge branches which border my constituency. Our post offices are a cornerstone for many of our residents, a number of whom cannot use online services. The dedicated staff who work in our post offices know those constituents. Does the Leader of the House agree that we should have a debate in Government time on ensuring that, if post offices close, we have a full equality impact assessment and that the Post Office considers its decisions?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government inherited a Post Office that was simply not fit for purpose, following a lot of disinterest from the previous Government. The Post Office does need serious culture change. I assure her that, as I understand it, no

[Lucy Powell]

decision has been taken on the future of Crown post offices, but I know from my own constituency, where recently the Spring Gardens Crown post office in Manchester was closed, what a big issue this is for local communities. I encourage every constituency MP, like her, to raise these matters here and directly with Ministers.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): The previous Government identified the A75 road as of crucial importance to the UK as a whole, so despite the fact that transport is a devolved matter, money was earmarked for improvements. I have been trying, without success, to find out what is happening to that money. I was astonished to find that a Labour MSP was able to tweet details about the road—he apparently knows more about it than anyone in this House. May we have a statement from the Government explaining what is happening with the A75 and the money that was clearly earmarked for it?

Lucy Powell: As the hon. Gentleman says, these issues are devolved and we allocate the money as part of other consequential to the Scottish Government to consider those matters, but I will ensure that the issue he raises is noticed by the Minister. I will ask for a full reply about that road to be given to him.

Matt Bishop (Forest of Dean) (Lab): In my constituency, many constituents have expressed concern over Gloucestershire Constabulary's decision to suspend new firearms licensing applications due to unexpected resourcing issues. It further says that there will be a minimum 24-month wait for applications currently in process. That has put many local businesses, including farmers and shooting clubs, in a difficult position, with many unable to continue their operations when their current licences expire. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on how the Government can support those businesses, in particular those that rely on firearms licences, during this period of disruption?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important question. He will be aware that resources allocated to firearms licensing units are a matter for the relevant chief officer. However, we would expect forces to process these applications very quickly and efficiently so that resources can get to where they are needed. The next Home Office questions are the week after next, so he might want to raise the matter with the Home Secretary then.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): Hundreds of farmers in my rural constituency are facing a mental health crisis. They are not sure whether their farms and their life's work will be passed on to the next generation, or whether they will even be farmed in five years' time. I constructively relayed some of those concerns to the farming Minister, the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), earlier this week. Will the Leader of the House today commit to a debate in Government time on the proposed changes to the agricultural property relief and inheritance tax rules to give our farmers the reassurance they so desperately need?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question, which gives me an opportunity to further clarify some of the points that he and others have

raised. The Government figures are based on actual claims, not other people's analysis. They show that three quarters of farmers would be unaffected by the changes and that only around 500 claims from the wealthiest estates would be affected each year. There are a number of mitigations available, in relation to how long that could be paid back and so on. The Government support our rural communities. We support our farmers. We are really proud to have returned a record number of Labour MPs representing rural communities. [Interruption.] Opposition Members chunter from the Back Benches, but that is why we had a debate earlier this week on these issues. There have been other opportunities in this House to raise them. I am sure he will have further such opportunities.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): This week I attended the funeral of Margaret Jones, who, among her many other achievements, became the first mayor of Thurrock in 1974. I am sure that colleagues across the House will join me in expressing gratitude for more than half a century of dedicated public service. When I asked those closest to Margaret how she would have liked to be remembered, one said, "As a committed socialist who always knew her red from her blue even in her darkest days, and as a dedicated supporter of children and young people." Will the Leader of the House allow time for us to discuss this Labour Government's plans to improve the lives of children and young people, as a fitting tribute to that formidable woman?

Lucy Powell: What a lovely tribute to Margaret, a councillor in my hon. Friend's constituency. I am sure that an Adjournment debate on the topics that she has raised would also be a fitting tribute.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): Following the Post Office's announcement of its transformation programme, Poulton-le-Fylde's central post office is threatened with closure. A petition that we started just last night has already received 1,600 signatures in less than 24 hours, which shows the strength of feeling in the community and its support for that vital service. May I echo the call from the hon. Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi) for a proper debate on both the importance of post offices and the transformation programme itself, so that Members can raise their concerns about the impact on their local communities in a constructive and cross-party manner, as I will happily do with the hon. Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Member is absolutely right to raise this issue. As I said earlier, Crown post offices provide a vital lifeline for many communities and local economies. They process big parcel orders and provide a range of other services, and they are also a key part of our ambition to have financial hubs in every community. It is right for constituency Members to come together to raise such issues, and the hon. Gentleman has just demonstrated that kind of cross-party support. It was exactly the sort of demonstration that should be brought to the Backbench Business Committee, and I am sure its Chairman has heard that call today.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): The green belt was designed precisely to stop soulless urban sprawl overtaking villages and towns such as Borehamwood,

Potters Bar, Cuffley, Bushey and other places in my constituency, yet the targets imposed on those areas by the Labour Government render its protections meaningless. Will the Leader of the House find time for us to discuss protection of the green belt before Labour's policies do to the countryside exactly what socialist policies did up and down the country in the 1960s and 1970s?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry, but I will take no lectures from the right hon. Gentleman on dealing with the housing crisis that we inherited from the Government in which he was Deputy Prime Minister. This Government are unashamedly pro-house building to deal with the crisis, but this is not a developer free-for-all; we will be protecting the green belt and prioritising brownfield and grey belt development. Moreover, all our ambitious plans, on which we are working at pace, will be locally led.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): My constituent Laura Potter was recently involved in a serious road traffic accident involving an illegal e-scooter. The car was written off and my constituent was extremely upset by the prospect of the police being unable to do anything about it. May we have a debate in Government time on the illegal use of e-scooters?

Lucy Powell: I am very sorry to hear about what happened in my hon. Friend's constituency. This topic comes up regularly in business questions. We will soon be updating the strategic framework for road safety—the first time that has been done in more than a decade—and I will ensure that the Transport Secretary comes to the House to update us first on these matters, but in the meantime my hon. Friend may want to apply for a fuller debate.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Members may be surprised to hear that marriage between first cousins remains legal in the UK, despite the genetic issues and concerns about women's rights. Norway banned the practice recently, Sweden is considering doing the same, and various states in America have banned it as well. I received a very good answer to my written parliamentary question on this subject, and I should like the Leader of the House to pass on my thanks to the Minister responsible for it. I am keen to build on work that I did in the last Parliament to ban hymenoplasty and so-called virginity testing—work that the last Government incorporated in the Health and Care Act 2022—but will the Leader of the House speak to the relevant Department to find out whether time can be made for an debate on this important issue?

Lucy Powell: These do sound like important issues. I know that the right hon. Gentleman has raised them in the past, and I am sure he will continue to. It is nice to receive some good feedback about a written parliamentary question, which is not exactly the norm during business questions. I do not think that, in the short term, we have any legislative vehicles for what he described, but I am sure that the issues would be a very good topic for a Westminster Hall debate, or possibly even a Backbench Business debate.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Rochdale's "Giving Back" Christmas toy appeal has begun accepting donations. It ensures that children from disadvantaged backgrounds

have a present to open on Christmas Day. It is run by Rochdale council staff, and last year it supported 2,000 children. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking the appeal's founder, Helen Walton? More importantly, given that nearly 50% of children in Rochdale now live in relative poverty, thanks to the actions of the Conservative party over the last 14 years, does she agree that the Government's child poverty strategy will be the best way to tackle the national shame of children going without, not just at Christmas but all year round?

Lucy Powell: I certainly join my hon. Friend in thanking all the Rochdale council staff and Helen Walton for their work on what sounds like an extremely good campaign. He is right: it is a shame on our country that so many children still live in poverty, without presents at Christmas and, in many cases, without food on the table most evenings. That is why we formed the child poverty taskforce. We are determined to reduce these inequalities and ensure that the scourge of child poverty is eradicated.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): In July, the Home Secretary made claims to the House about her asylum policies that appear to be untrue. The impact assessment that she published at the time was contradicted in a letter sent to me by her permanent secretary, which appeared to reveal double counting of migrants, enabling the Home Secretary to inflate the statistics that she was citing. I have raised this in Westminster Hall with the Minister with responsibility for migration, and with the Home Secretary here in the House. I have written to the Home Secretary, but have received no reply. I have submitted a written parliamentary question asking when she will reply, and I have been fobbed off. Will the Leader of the House tell the Home Secretary to come to the House and make a statement? This is really, really important.

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear of the hon. Gentleman's frustrating experiences. If he wants to send me details of the questions that he was asking—I do not know the figures, because he did not mention them—I will certainly ensure that he receives that reply, but I am sure that the Home Secretary will continue to update the House regularly on the action we are taking to tackle illegal migration and the huge backlog that was left by his party.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): On Sunday, in Abergavenny in my constituency, we were rocked by a huge fire that destroyed a heritage building. Two high street businesses were destroyed, Magic Cottage charity shop and Cable News, and several other businesses remain closed because of the impact. I am sure that the House will want to join me in sending best wishes to all those affected, and to salute Paul Cable, whose early reporting of the fire meant that no one was hurt. I want to extend my thanks to the brave and dedicated staff of South Wales fire and rescue service, and also to Gwent police. Will the Leader of the House find Government time for us to debate the importance of our police and fire services in keeping our constituents safe?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend raises an issue of grave importance to her constituency, and I am pleased to join her in thanking Paul Cable, Gwent police and South Wales fire and rescue service for the tremendous

[Lucy Powell]

job that they did in preventing the fire from being a bigger tragedy than it was. Our firefighters operate in challenging and high-risk environments, and the Government absolutely value the work that they do.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Over the weekend, my fantastic local football club, Silsden, progressed to the third round of the FA vase after beating Ramsbottom, thanks to two first-half goals from Casey Stewart. We all know that local sports clubs play a fantastic role in bringing fans and residents together. Could we have a debate in Government time on the importance of grassroots sports clubs and the positive benefits that they offer our young people?

Lucy Powell: I am delighted to join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating his local football club on what sounds like a fantastic result. He will be aware that we have brought to the House of Lords the strengthened Football Governance Bill, which will find its way to this House. It is particularly important to ensure that grassroots football gets the financial support that it needs to be sustainable, so that clubs like his can continue to thrive.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): The 93 leaseholders at No. 1 London Road in Newcastle-under-Lyme have been pushed to breaking point by the most disgraceful rise in buildings insurance costs in the wake of the Grenfell disaster. May I please ask the Leader of the House for a debate on how we can protect my constituents from the vulture-like behaviour of those insurance companies?

Lucy Powell: This is a huge issue in my constituency as well, and my hon. Friend is right to raise it. Leaseholders really are the poor relations when it comes to housing tenure. They face increasing costs from insurance, but also from managing agents, building safety mediation and so on, making their homes unaffordable and, in some cases, unsellable. That is why we are bringing forward the leasehold reform draft legislation next year.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure and a privilege to ask the Leader of the House a question. I would like to turn the House's attention to the Netherlands. Since the 7 October attack on Israel, the wave of antisemitic attacks and abuse has increased worldwide, including in our continent of Europe. The violent attacks on Jewish individuals in Amsterdam, and the recent arrests in Antwerp for a planned "Jew hunt", signify the spread of hateful terms such as "jodenjacht" on social media. Israel's National Security Council has advised its citizens to exercise caution in countries such as Britain, Belgium and the Netherlands. What would the Government do if such attacks took place against our Jewish community in Britain? Will she ask Ministers in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to raise this issue with their counterparts in Belgium and the Netherlands?

Lucy Powell: Like the hon. Gentleman, I was utterly horrified by the antisemitic attacks on Israeli citizens in Amsterdam recently, and our thoughts are with all those affected by those awful events. I condemn abhorrent acts of violence wherever they occur, including in this country and Amsterdam. The Government take antisemitism

very seriously and have a zero-tolerance approach to it. I am pleased to see that the hon. Gentleman has been so successful in the early draws for Backbench Business debates, because he is a stalwart of this place and deserves to be at the front of the queue for many more debates to come.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me and my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) in congratulating Newcastle and Stafford college, which has just secured its second "outstanding" Ofsted rating? As a proud graduate of a tertiary college, I know the importance of such institutions in providing the good jobs of the future—though I doubt that Nelson and Colne college expected my good job of the future to be the one I am doing now. Could we please have a debate about the importance of tertiary education around the UK?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Newcastle and Stafford college. Getting an "outstanding" rating twice in a row is some achievement for a further education college, and she should be very proud to represent it. We have inherited a really terrible situation in further education. I was pleased that the recent budget invested an extra £300 million as a down payment, but it will take us some time to get further education back in a fit state.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Last week marked another significant milestone for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme, as Mayor Ros Jones announced that a preferred bid to reopen and operate Doncaster Sheffield airport had been identified; the aim is to reinstate passenger flights by spring 2026. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating all those involved in reaching this crucial stage, and will she support my request to the Department for Transport and the Civil Aviation Authority to prioritise the approval of the necessary airspace as soon as it is required?

Lucy Powell: I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising this issue for a second time in business questions; it is testament to his doughty campaigning to reopen Doncaster Sheffield airport and get planes flying again. I congratulate him and all involved on the agreement that has been reached. I will certainly make sure that Ministers do all they can to make sure that this comes to fruition as soon as possible.

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): Caroline Gore, a 44-year-old mother, was tragically killed by her abuser less than four weeks after he avoided jail for breaching a restraining order. Although I welcome this Government's commitment to halving violence against women and girls, does the Leader of the House agree that a minimum jail term for breaches would help protect women? Would she welcome a debate on strengthening the law?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear of the case that my hon. Friend raises. In doing so, she reminds us once again that we have to reduce violence against women and girls as a priority. It is one of the lead missions for this Government, and new measures will come forward on these matters early next year. There is a sentencing review under way, and I encourage her to contribute.

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): Following the question asked by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), the Standing Orders set out the role of the sponsoring Member in nominating Members to sit on the Committee considering a private Member's Bill, but they do not recuse the Committee of Selection, which is dominated by Government Whips, from a duty to ensure that the strength of opinion expressed in any Division at Second Reading is properly reflected. Will the Leader of the House reassure us about the principles that guide the composition of Public Bill Committees?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I answered some of it earlier, but she is absolutely right: should the House support a private Member's Bill at Second Reading—let us say, the Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults Bill, which will be debated at the end of November—it would be for the sponsoring Member to choose the members of the Committee. The guidance is absolutely clear that the nomination of members must reflect the party balance in the House and a balance of the views expressed on Second Reading. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Spenn Valley (Kim Leadbeater) is very keen indeed to follow the guidance and ensure that there is a balanced Committee. By the way, that Committee is likely to consider the issues for several weeks. Following Second Reading, it will be many months until this House further considers the matter on Report and Third Reading.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): After 19 years of service with Lancashire police, my constituent John was forced to end his service due to injuries sustained on operational duty. It is only right that workers who have been injured on duty and had their careers cut short are recognised for their invaluable contribution to our communities. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate on the need to introduce a medal for seriously injured and medically retired emergency service personnel, to ensure that they receive the recognition and gratitude they deserve?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the invaluable contribution of our police officers and the important role that they play in keeping our communities safe; it is right that they receive recognition for their work. He will know that medals are awarded by the Government on behalf of His Majesty the King and on the basis of the relevant criteria, and I encourage my hon. Friend to nominate his constituent for his service and to continue taking up these issues.

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): Thousands of people in my constituency will benefit hugely from the Government's decision in the Budget to increase the national living wage—a measure that the Leader of the Opposition has previously made it clear that she is against. Can we have a debate about the importance of putting more money in the hands of working people and the impact that will have on economic growth?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This Government have made a clear choice to support working people in this country—not just by increasing the national living wage to £12.21, but through a range of other measures in the Budget—and support our

public services. I am not quite sure any more what the Conservatives' view of the Budget is. They seem to want all the benefits, all the investment and all the money that the Budget will raise, but they do not want to say where they think that money should come from; they are against all the tax-raising measures to get us there. There will be debate on the Finance Bill in due course, when I am sure we can discuss these matters further still.

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating my constituent Michelle Bramble on her well-deserved win at the *Local Government Chronicle* awards for her excellent work in equality, diversity and inclusion over many years, and her valuable experience in Gravesham? Will she schedule a debate on the importance of EDI champions and their work in our local communities to foster inclusive environments for all our constituents?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Michelle Bramble on all the work that she has done in her constituency. We often get questions about the importance of diversity and the important role that community champions play, and I am sure that would be a good topic for a Westminster Hall debate.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): Next week is UK Parliament Week. I recently had the privilege of visiting Beaconhill primary school in Cramlington in my constituency. It was fantastic to meet the leadership team and hear about their incredible work to ensure that every child gets to share in opportunity. I also met Oliver and Melody and the school council, who spoke about how the antisocial behaviour of a few has left the local park strewn with litter and unable to be enjoyed by local children. May we have a debate in Government time on tackling antisocial behaviour, to ensure that our public spaces can be enjoyed by everyone?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in recognising the forthcoming Youth Parliament and UK Parliament Week; I am sure we will discuss that on many more occasions. She is absolutely right to raise the issue of antisocial behaviour, which is a blight on our community. That is why, through our forthcoming crime and policing Bill, we will introduce new powers to tackle antisocial behaviour, shoplifting and off-road bikes, and put our neighbourhood police back in our communities, where they need to be.

Satvir Kaur (Southampton Test) (Lab): Residents of Compass Point in my constituency are living in squalor. Water from the roof is being directed to the basement, causing regular flooding; loose pipework and wires are making the site unsafe; and raw sewage is seeping into the children's play area. Does the Leader of the House agree that that is wholly unacceptable and that more needs to be done to hold to account freeholders such as BMR, their subcontractors, and lettings agents such as Leaders? Will she join me in requesting that they act swiftly and without delay to resolve the many, many issues that have been raised but not responded to?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right to raise these issues. As she points out, permitted development rights, which exploded under the previous Government, have given rise to quite a lot of poor-quality housing that is

[Lucy Powell]

not fit for purpose. We are keeping the issue of permitted development rights under review, but we are strengthening the rights of renters with our Renters' Rights Bill, and the rights of leaseholders with our leasehold reform Bill, which will both be concluding soon.

Jonathan Hinder (Pendle and Clitheroe) (Lab): I fully support the Government's plan to reduce Britain's reliance on overseas workers by focusing the new body Skills England on those sectors most in need, such as construction, engineering and healthcare—something the Conservative party failed so spectacularly to deliver while it was in government. Many businesses in my constituency want to see that happen as soon as possible, but it will require a cross-Government approach. May we have a statement from the Home Secretary on how she will oversee it?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right that these are issues for the Department for Education, working with the Home Secretary. He will be aware that the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (Transfer of Functions etc) Bill, which will establish Skills England, is going through the Lords at the moment. We have put extra money into further education, we are clamping down on illegal migration, and we are ensuring that the Migration Advisory Committee identifies current and future skills gaps and guides our approach to these matters.

David Baines (St Helens North) (Lab): Garswood and Earlestown stations in my constituency are two of 21 in the Liverpool city region that are not accessible to all passengers. This is something that local residents, councillors and the council have campaigned on for many years, along with previous MPs, and metro mayor Steve Rotherham is supportive of calls to fix the situation. Does the Leader of the House agree that, in this day and age, it is simply unacceptable for rail stations not to be accessible to all passengers? Can she advise me how and where I might raise the issue so that we can get the necessary improvements made quickly?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. It is shocking that, in this day and age, much of our transport infrastructure—in particular our railway infrastructure—remains inaccessible for those with disabilities and other needs. He will be aware that the Transport Secretary made a statement earlier this week about a review of Access for All and work that she is doing in that area, and I know that she is keen to keep the House updated regularly as that work goes forward.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): The UK's industrial strategy relies on closing the skills gap, but women and ethnic minorities remain significantly under-represented in science, technology, engineering and maths education and careers. Dudley College of Technology in my constituency is leading the way in providing technical skills and innovation training. Will the Leader of the House grant time for a debate on improving access and inclusion in STEM, to ensure that our workforce reflects the diversity we will need for our future economic success?

Lucy Powell: What an important topic, which is very close to my heart as a woman STEM graduate. It is shocking that so many years after I graduated—well,

maybe only a few—we still face such a disparity in the number of women and girls, and the number of men, studying STEM subjects and pursuing the careers that come thereafter. My hon. Friend might want to raise these important matters with the Science Secretary in questions next week.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I want to get the remaining 20 colleagues in, so please keep your questions short—and, Leader of the House, keep your answers short too.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Bournemouth East has had a fantastic few weeks. We have just seen ground broken on a new building at the Royal Bournemouth hospital, Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal has been installed as the chancellor of Health Sciences University, and perhaps best of all, we have seen Bournemouth football club beat the Prime Minister's favourite club, Arsenal, and the Leader of the House's favourite club, Manchester City. Will the Leader of the House join me and the people of Bournemouth in congratulating everyone involved in making our town an even better place?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I think I should put it on the record that I am from a family of Gooners.

Lucy Powell: Well, Madam Deputy Speaker, my hon. Friend was doing really well until he reminded me that Bournemouth beat Manchester City recently, so I am not sure I will be visiting all that soon, but he makes a very good plea for his constituency.

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): My constituent Joe Abbess was just 17 when he tragically drowned just along the coast in an area that was designated as a safe swimming zone. In a separate incident, 12-year-old Sunnah Khan died in the same area on the same day. Currents and riptides claim the lives of hundreds of people every year. Will the Leader of the House make time for us to debate how best to promote water safety through the education system, and avoid these kinds of deaths?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that drowning is among the leading causes of accidental death in this country, which might surprise many. This would be an excellent topic for an Adjournment debate or a Westminster Hall debate, should he want to apply for one.

Gregor Poynton (Livingston) (Lab): Over the past month, my office has been inundated with reports from specific areas of the Livingston constituency regarding the inappropriate use of fireworks, which is causing misery to many communities. I pay tribute to Police Scotland, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and West Lothian council for doing whatever they can to mitigate this problem. However, I do not want to see it happen again in 2025. Will the Leader of the House grant Government time for us to debate the inappropriate use of fireworks and the things we can do to tackle this challenge?

Lucy Powell: Fireworks are a big issue that is raised with every Member of Parliament, and I think many people will be asking about this today and in future weeks. We will soon launch a renewed firework safety campaign. My hon. Friend might want to apply for a Backbench Business debate, as I know it would be very well attended.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): In 2017, a fire at Newgrange care home tragically caused the deaths of two elderly residents—Ivy Spriggs and Daphne Holloway. Legislation currently going through the House states that new care homes should have sprinkler systems, but it does not recognise the need for this to be applied retrospectively, for which Daphne's daughter, Claire, has continued to campaign. Will this issue be considered in our upcoming debate on fire safety? Additionally, although I appreciate that care homes fall below the 18-metre height restriction, could they be included on the higher-risk register?

Lucy Powell: I send my condolences to the families of Ivy Spriggs and Daphne Holloway. I am very sorry to hear about what happened. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that there will soon be another debate on issues raised by the Grenfell report. Although care homes fall outside the current requirements, he would be right to raise these important matters in that debate.

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): Allotment holders in Wymondham were saddened to hear that they have only one year left on their plots before Anglian Water ends their lease early. Can we have a debate in Government time on the need for water companies to live up to their corporate responsibility and, in Wymondham's case, help allotmenters move to a new site?

Lucy Powell: I hope Anglian Water has heard my hon. Friend's comments. If not, I will raise his comments directly with Anglian Water, because this needs to be resolved swiftly. I am sure the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will want to help, too.

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I was shocked to learn that only 29% of adult social care workers are recorded as having received dementia training. With a diagnosis rate of 69% in Wolverhampton North East, and with many still undiagnosed, will the Government make time for a debate on making dementia training mandatory for all adult social care staff to ensure they are equipped to provide compassionate and informed care?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. Those working in adult social care have, for too long, been seen as Cinderella care workers and have not been given the support, status and training they need to carry out their work. That is why this Government are bringing forward a range of measures to upskill those working in adult social care to ensure they have the status and training they need.

Mr Mark Sowards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): My constituency is well served by *The Yorkshire Post* and the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, but we have lost hyper-local publications such as the *Morley Observer*, which ceased in 2019. In their place, local enthusiasts and journalists have popped up with new platforms such

as the *West Leeds Dispatch*, which covers Farnley and Wortley in my constituency. Although these publications provide excellent local journalism, they struggle for viability and they struggle to produce content. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on the importance of supporting the survival of hyper-local journalism?

Lucy Powell: I agree that local and hyper-local journalism is vital to combating misinformation and disinformation, which are spreading quickly in many of our communities. That is why the Culture Secretary recently announced the Government's intention to develop a local media strategy. My hon. Friend may want to raise this directly with her at questions next week.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): The Post Office provides an essential service for residents and businesses in our town centres. However, in Basingstoke the franchise branch located in WHSmith is set to close next year, and there are currently no clear plans for a replacement post office in the town centre. Given the Government's commitment to establishing local banking hubs, which are vital for maintaining access to financial services, may I echo the calls of hon. Members on both sides of the House for time to debate this essential service?

Lucy Powell: It is clear for all to see that there are serious questions for the Post Office to answer about how it runs its business, as serious change is needed. I am sorry to hear about the franchise branch in Basingstoke, because local post offices are critical to their communities and to supporting banking hubs. I will support every effort to secure a debate on this matter.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): Aylesbury Wombles is a fantastic litter-picking charity that works hard to make Aylesbury a greener, cleaner and better place to live. In September alone, it collected 5,749 plastic bottles. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Richard Walker, Abigail Walker and all the Aylesbury Wombles on their remarkable work, and in welcoming their campaign for a deposit return scheme to reduce plastic waste?

Lucy Powell: I am delighted to thank the Aylesbury Wombles for all their litter-picking. It is not glamorous, but it is an important job that needs doing. The previous Government failed to do what they promised on litter-picking, and they bottled it on a number of issues, including the deposit return scheme that this Government will be bringing forward.

Lucy Rigby (Northampton North) (Lab): At our remembrance services in Northampton on Sunday, we honoured the lives of all those who made the ultimate sacrifice for our country. I welcome the Government's introduction of the new digital veteran card this week, as it will better support our armed forces community. Will the Leader of the House consider making time for a debate on our housing plans, and specifically on how we can improve access to housing for current and former service personnel?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend will be aware that the Prime Minister has pledged, under the homes for heroes scheme, to exempt veterans and serving personnel from

[Lucy Powell]

rules that require a connection to a local area. She might want to raise some of these issues on Second Reading of the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill next week.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): In Norfolk, we are fortunate to have some of the most fertile agricultural land in the country. As a rural Labour MP, I am proud of the work my local farmers do to produce high-quality food for the whole country. However, this land is highly prized, and while I wholeheartedly support the Government's mission to cut carbon emissions, we must not let food security come second to energy security by allowing our best land to be covered in solar farms. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should have a debate on the importance of protecting the most valuable agricultural land when planning applications for solar farms are considered?

Nick Timothy: Hear, hear!

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend can hear the agreement, which suggests this might be a topic that has cross-party support. This Government take food security incredibly seriously because it is an issue of national security. We are committed to increasing solar energy as part of our mission to become a clean energy superpower by 2030, but we must strike a balance. That is why it is so important that we hear from local MPs about these decisions.

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): Many farmers in my constituency, including those around villages such as Wouldham, Burham and Eccles, have been blighted by fly-tipping and other environmental crimes. Will the Leader of the House guarantee Government time to debate the increasing scourge of environmental crime, particularly fly-tipping?

Lucy Powell: Fly-tipping is regularly raised in this place, and we all know what a significant problem it can cause. I suggest that my hon. Friend applies for a Westminster Hall debate, which I am sure would be well attended.

Maureen Burke (Glasgow North East) (Lab): My constituents in Glasgow North East will be delighted by the Chancellor's announcement in the Budget that the earnings threshold for carer's allowance will be increased to £196 a week. That will enable many more family carers to earn and receive that important financial assistance, which recognises the incredible work they do to support their loved ones. However, many of my constituents still worry about the cliff edge that exists and about how the increase in the minimum wage might affect their entitlement to this support. Will the Leader of the House join me in praising the work done by family carers, and give thought to holding a debate in Government time to recognise the role of carers in our society? Crucially, will she consider raising the concerns I mentioned with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions?

Lucy Powell: What an important topic to raise! My hon. Friend is right that many issues remain, but I was delighted that this Government announced the biggest ever cash increase in the earnings threshold for carer's

allowance. It was the first time it has been increased for many decades. That sits alongside the extra support we are providing for social care, children's social care and a new pilot scheme on kinship allowance. I will ensure that the Minister has heard my hon. Friend's calls today.

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): I welcome the announcement this week of the Government's commitment to developing a national youth strategy, and youth organisations in my constituency look forward to contributing to it. However, given the 73% reduction in spending on youth services under the previous Government and reports by the Children's Society that our young people are now some of the most unhappy in Europe, will she allow time for a debate on the current state of youth services and youth work, and the chronic decline in the wellbeing of our young people?

Lucy Powell: I am glad that my hon. Friend supports the action the Government are taking on a national youth service and a youth strategy. As my hon. Friend knows, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport came to the House to make a statement on that earlier this week and she is keen to keep the House informed, because we have seen youth services totally hollowed out over the past 14 years and it is vital that we get those services back into our communities.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): I met members of an endometriosis support group that was set up recently by Derby County Community Trust. I heard from women who had not been taken seriously and who had had their pain dismissed, taken significant time out of education and work, and faced appallingly long waits for surgery. I also met some of their mums, who suffered exactly the same thing 25 years ago. Can we have a statement from the Government on how we will prevent the next generation—their daughters—from suffering the same thing?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising those issues, which will be very familiar to many hon. Members from their casework and those they meet. Women's health still does not have parity of esteem in our health service. That is why the Government are taking forward the women's health strategy for England. I will ensure that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care comes to the House to update us on that.

Mr Connor Rand (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): Over recent years, we have seen deeply troubling reports about desperate families being forced to steal baby formula to feed their children. Following the Competition and Markets Authority's report on the high prices of baby formula and a lack of competition in the UK market, can we have a debate in Government time on how we can make that vital product more affordable, including by reforming the Healthy Start payment that we know many low-income parents, including those in Altrincham and Sale West, rely on to be able to buy baby formula?

Lucy Powell: The infant formula crisis is heartbreaking. We do not want to see mums having to shoplift to feed their babies, but all too often that is happening. The CMA recently published a report about price inflation and the lack of competition in this space, and there will

be a final report in February. I hear what my hon. Friend says about support in the early years and I will ensure that he gets a reply.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): Earlier this month, a BBC investigation uncovered a range of issues with the Dart charge, the toll paid to use the Dartford crossing, consistent with the significant problems I have been raising with National Highways, including accounts falling unexpectedly dormant, fines for cars not using the crossing and cases being referred to enforcement agencies. Will the Leader of the House advise me whether she can find time for a debate in the House on the administration of the Dart charge?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend continues to raise issues about the Dartford crossing, and he is making a name for himself in so doing. If he wants to apply for a Backbench Business debate on these matters, I am sure it would get wide support from MPs from that area.

Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab): I recently had the privilege of visiting the Holme Valley mountain rescue team, which will be celebrating its 60th anniversary next year. Its mission, “We are here for everyone”, underscores its extensive contributions, from rescuing individuals on the moors, to tackling moor fires and aiding the police in rural searches. With 60 dedicated volunteers and 53 call-outs so far this year, will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the mountain rescue team for its hard and dedicated work? Additionally, can we have a debate in Government time on the importance of mountain rescue teams in this country?

Lucy Powell: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating the Holme Valley mountain rescue team on its work, which he so clearly outlined. I encourage him to apply for an Adjournment debate to raise some of those important topics.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): It was fireworks night last week, and many people in my constituency celebrated and had a nice time enjoying that traditional event. However, many constituents have written to me about the impact of fireworks on their pets, which can

be extremely distressing. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Gregor Poynton), I have concerns about how fireworks affect my constituents’ most beloved animals. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has written a note called “Kind Sparks”, which talks about measures we can take. I add my voice to others in calling on the Leader of the House to arrange a debate so that we can discuss how to reduce the impact and the distress that fireworks cause to pets, animals and wildlife.

Lucy Powell: At this time of year, we get a lot of questions about fireworks, and particularly their impact on pets and livestock, which my hon. Friend raised so well. Given that three or four hon. Members have raised the issue, I encourage them to club together and apply for a debate.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): The House will be aware of the appalling case of John Smyth, who subjected dozens of boys and young men to unimaginable abuse over decades. While the Archbishop of Canterbury has resigned over the matter, is it not time that the Church of England becomes more accountable and transparent? Will the Leader of the House raise with colleagues in the Cabinet Office how the Church of England can designate bishops, dioceses, cathedrals and national Church institutions as public authorities for the purposes of the Freedom of Information Act?

Lucy Powell: I am sure the whole House will want to join me in sending our thoughts to the victims of the late John Smyth and the awful crimes he perpetrated for so many years. My hon. Friend will be aware that these are matters for the Church of England, which is being held accountable for them publicly and in other ways. Safeguarding is absolutely paramount. My colleagues from the Cabinet Office are on the Front Bench with me and will have heard my hon. Friend’s very important question.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We got nearly 60 Back Benchers in, so thank you so much for keeping the questions short and thank you to the Leader of the House as well.

Points of Order

12.58 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I crave your indulgence. As you rightly point out, nearly 60 colleagues asked for debates or statements. I gently remind colleagues that forms for Backbench Business debates are available in the Vote Office, on the website and on MemberHub. If any colleague wishes to have any advice, the Backbench Business Committee is here to help.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Chair of the Backbench Business Committee will know that that was not a real or appropriate point of order, but I appreciate his desire to ensure that Back Benchers can raise local issues in all the sections of the estate, so I am grateful to him.

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. As a member of the Procedure Committee, I was concerned about media reports overnight and this morning that the Chancellor will, this evening, make a major announcement about public sector pensions. Given recent communications from the Chair, including by you, Madam Deputy Speaker, will you advise me on how the Chancellor's statement could be made to this House first?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving notice of his intention to raise this point of order. Mr Speaker has not received notice of the Government's intention to make a statement on this subject today. I would add that Mr Speaker has repeatedly made it clear that Ministers must make important policy statements to this House first, in accordance with the Government's own ministerial code. No doubt those messages have now been heard.

Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015 (Extension) Bill [*Lords*]

Second Reading

12.59 pm

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am pleased to open the debate on this important but straightforward piece of legislation. I should start by welcoming the shadow Paymaster General to his role. I have no doubt that we will have some great, robust debates over the Dispatch Boxes. I will just say to him, now that he is in the shadow role, that I very much hope we can continue the cross-party work that his predecessor and I were pursuing on infected blood compensation. That cross-party working has been extremely important.

Members will of course be aware—we debated this on Tuesday—that this Government are pursuing reform of the House of Lords. I should be clear with the House that this Bill is distinct from those reforms. It does not seek to make fundamental changes; its simple effect is to extend, by five years, the arrangements for the appointment of Lords Spiritual contained in the Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015. And like the 2015 Act, this Bill has been introduced at the request of the Church of England.

I think it may be helpful to give the House a little background as to how we arrived here. There are 26 bishops who sit in the House of Lords, and, before 2015, the process for how and when they sit in the other place was determined solely by the Bishoprics Act 1878. Five seats are automatically allocated to the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Archbishop of York, followed by the Bishops of London, Durham and Winchester. The remainder were filled on the basis of seniority—in other words, length of tenure.

In 2014, the General Synod of the Church of England passed legislation to allow women to become bishops for the first time. However, because of the rules of seniority, we would have had to wait many years before those first female bishops could have been eligible to receive their writs of summons and become Lords Spiritual. That would have created a situation whereby women were prominently involved in Church leadership but were unrepresented in the House of Lords.

To address that, at the Church's request, both Houses passed legislation in 2015 to fast-track female bishops into the House of Lords. The effect of that legislation is that if there is a female diocesan bishop available when a Lords Spiritual seat becomes vacant, she will be appointed to the seat ahead of a male bishop irrespective of seniority.

Since enacted, the 2015 Act has had a clear effect. We have seen six female bishops sit in the other place earlier than they otherwise would have done. The Bishop of Gloucester was appointed to the House as the first female bishop on 7 September 2015. Since that first appointment, the Lords Spiritual have welcomed six more women to sit on their Benches.

The value of the legislation is about to be seen in action again. Following the recent retirement of the Bishop of Worcester, Debbie Sellin, the Bishop of Peterborough, will soon replace him in the Lords under the provisions

of the 2015 Act. And then, the recently appointed Bishop of Coventry, Sophie Jelley, will be first in line for appointment to the House of Lords upon any future retirements.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as you can see, there has been progress, but there remain only a handful of female bishops on the Lords Spiritual Benches today. The issue is that that 2015 Act will expire in May 2025. What the five-year extension contained in this Bill does is to allow more time for the positive effects of that 2015 piece of legislation to operate.

The Bill means that if any of the Lords Spiritual seats that are not automatically allocated become vacant between now and 2030, they will continue to be filled by the most senior eligible female bishop—if there are any available at that point.

Adam Jodge (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I am enjoying immensely my right hon. Friend's very detailed explanation of how we got here. May I ask him what conversations he has had with the Church about the steps that it can take to increase the diversity of potential bishops and to ensure that, ultimately, there is a wider pool of people to appoint to the House of Lords.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. As he would imagine, I certainly have had discussions with the Church of England, and not just prior to the introduction of this Bill, but prior to the wider reform of the Lords in which the Government are engaged. Those conversations are hugely important, as is diversity. This legislation will extend the diversity—having women bishops in the House of Lords—that we have seen since the 2015 Act reached the statute book.

The Government's view is that five years is an appropriate length of time to extend these provisions to consolidate the positive effect that there has been so far. I hope that this very narrowly focused and simple Bill, which will extend an Act that has achieved such positive change over the past nine years, will gain support from all parts of the House.

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

1.6 pm

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I thank the Paymaster General for his clear introduction of this legislation and for the praise that he gave to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen). I very much want to continue the work that my right hon. Friend did on the infected blood scandal with the Paymaster General, and I look forward to doing so.

May I also thank the right hon. Member for extending a warm welcome to me? I was a special adviser in the House of Lords in the months after the 2015 Act was passed and saw at first hand the introduction of the first female bishops. As Paymaster General, the right hon. Member has an important role. He will remember that Viscount Addison did it back in the 1940s, and became the first Labour Knight of the Garter, which I am sure the right hon. Member may be looking forward to in the future.

This is a straightforward Bill, limited in its scope, with the simple purpose of extending the Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015 by another five years. Introduced by the coalition Government, the 2015 Act complemented

the legislation that had been brought in the previous year to allow women to become bishops in the first place. The intention was to ensure that those women had a fair chance of sitting alongside their male counterparts as one of the 26 Lords Spiritual. Overall, the Act seems to have been successful in doing so. The original legislation suspended the rules that automatically elevated the most senior diocesan bishop to the House of Lords, and instead elevated a female diocesan bishop, if one was available. This has meant that there are now six women bishops in the House of Lords, all of whom have made valuable contributions in the other place.

The extension of the Bill is even shorter. It simply extends the sunset clause that was agreed in 2015, and maintains the suspension in rules so that female bishops will join the Lords Spiritual slightly sooner than they would otherwise have done. Let me express the Opposition's support for this simple piece of legislation.

When we first introduced this legislation, it was agreed that a 10-year span would give sufficient time to assess its effectiveness. And because we are here today, I believe that we can probably agree that that timeframe was fine. I would like to ask the Paymaster General when he expects this legislation to no longer be necessary. I predict that he might say 2030, as that is the date set for the sunset of this legislation. Can he confirm why it is this timeframe that has been selected? As I previously mentioned, there are six women bishops in the House of Lords, and I am glad that the legislation has supported them in contributing so meaningfully to Parliament, but can he tell the House whether he expects to see another five-year extension in a few years' time?

1.9 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Let me start by saying how pleased I am to be speaking in support of the Bill on Second Reading. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Minister on his opening remarks. In 2014, the Church of England made it possible for women to become bishops. The usual process of appointing bishops to the other place meant that it would have taken many years for women bishops to enter the Lords. That is why the 2015 Act was brought in: to speed up the representation of women among the Lords Spiritual.

As we debate today's short and narrow bill, I want to pay tribute to some of the women bishops who have made history. The Church of England's first woman bishop, Libby Lane, took her place as the Bishop of Stockport in 2015.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Hear, hear.

Marsha De Cordova: Indeed. Now the Bishop of Derby, Libby Lane is known for her dignified and thoughtful leadership, and her advocacy for children and young people. The first female Lord Spiritual was Rachel Treweek, who entered the Lords in 2015. During her tenure, she campaigned tirelessly for prison reform, especially on how prison affects women and families. She has called for more race, class, gender and age diversity in the Church, and has pushed for a humane response to refugees. She has also looked at ways in which we can improve children's sense of self-worth, value and confidence.

I also pay tribute to the Lord Bishop of London, Sarah Mullally, a former chief nursing officer who is deeply engaged with the community she serves. She has

[Marsha De Cordova]

promoted the living wage and spoken up for our beloved national health service and for the most vulnerable in society, including the elderly and those facing persecution.

The 2015 Act sped up the entry of six women bishops to the other place. We now have 25 Lords Spiritual, seven of whom are women. I hope that I am making the value of those women bishops' contributions in the Lords clear. They enrich debate and provide much-needed representation. The Lord Bishop of Chelmsford, Guli Francis-Dehqani, came to Britain as a refugee after her family fled persecution during the Iranian revolution. In the other place, she has carefully and intelligently worked hard to scrutinise policy on issues including housing, immigration and criminal justice. Like so many of her colleagues, she truly listens to the views of others, speaking with grassroots knowledge—most importantly about the region under her care.

The progress that we have seen in making the Lords Spiritual more diverse should be celebrated, but we know, and the Church knows, that another push is needed to make the Lords Spiritual representative and to bring them more up to date. That is particularly the case for women bishops from black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds, who make such an important contribution and are currently underrepresented in the other place, and more broadly in the Church.

Adam Jogee: On that point, I acknowledge the history-making nature of my hon. Friend's appointment as the Second Church Estates Commissioner, which I hope demonstrates our commitment to diversity and representation.

Marsha De Cordova: I thank my hon. Friend. It is truly an honour and a privilege to serve in that position.

I want to acknowledge the trailblazing Bishop of Dover, Rose Hudson-Wilkin, the first black woman to become a Church of England bishop. She was the chaplain to her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, and for nine years she was the chaplain to the Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow—the first woman to carry out that role. Her presence as a leader in the Church is a call to young women from diverse backgrounds not to shy away from the work that they want to do. But the Bishop of Dover is not yet one of many. There is more work to do. That is why the Bill will help. It is a narrow Bill, extending the existing provisions for five years, which should get us closer to the Lords Spiritual better representing the make-up of our country. That is why I support the Bill, and I hope that Members across the House will do the same.

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

1.14 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The Liberal Democrats support the extension of this legislation and its ambition to make our second Chamber more equal and representative. If passed, the Bill will extend the timeframe for the process of accelerating women bishops to the other Chamber, meaning that when a vacancy arises among the 21 bishops appointed by seniority, it will be filled by the most senior eligible female bishop, with the goal of reaching gender parity as soon as

possible. We are glad of the intention behind the Bill to address the current stark gender imbalance among our Lords Spiritual. We support that aim and welcome steps to ensure that Parliament better reflects the country it serves.

Fundamentally, however, we want to see complete reform of the House of Lords, strengthening the authority of our second Chamber with a democratic mandate. Parliament should be a body that represents and reflects the diversity and richness of the people and cultures that make up this country, and we must do all we can to make that happen across both Houses.

The Bill aims to ensure significant female representation among the Lords Spiritual by extending the arrangements of the Lords Spiritual (Women) Act by an additional five years, so that its powers continue until 2030. Without it, the position would return to the status quo ante whereby bishops became Members of the House of Lords according to their time in office. Given that the legislation allowing women to become bishops was enacted relatively recently, in 2014, it is vital that the provisions of the 2015 Act are extended in order to continue to address the historical inequality and accelerate the move towards gender parity in our upper Chamber. The extension of the Act is a positive step to ensure that bishops in the Lords are more representative of the country as a whole as well as their congregations, and the Bill, in supporting a move towards gender parity, is a significant step in moving towards a more representative Parliament.

Although we support the legislation and welcome all moves towards creating a more balanced Parliament, we must question why the latest legislation has been unsuccessful in reaching the goal of gender parity for bishops in the upper Chamber over the past decade. What further measures need to be taken to increase accessible routes to create a more equal Parliament? I ask the Minister why the legislation continues to be restricted with a time limit, and what conversations he has had with the Church of England regarding that. Does he believe that five additional years is sufficient time to reach equal representation, given the progress achieved by the original piece of legislation?

The 2015 Act allowed just six women bishops to take up seats in the House of Lords, although I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) for her excellent speech, which really highlighted the successes of the women who have been able to take up those roles. We must question why the latest legislation was unsuccessful, and what other steps we should take in order to reach the goal of gender parity.

Adam Jogee: I acknowledge the temperate and sensible approach that the hon. Lady takes to these matters. Does she share my query about where all those who have shown an interest this week in the presence of bishops in the House of Lords happen to be this afternoon?

Sarah Olney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. There was a great flurry of interest when I was stood here on Tuesday, making many of these points about the make-up of the House of Lords. I agree with him that it is extremely strange that the people who spent such a long time discussing these issues on Tuesday afternoon did not want to take the opportunity to discuss them further today.

Adam Jogee: With no time limits.

Sarah Olney: I am sure that it is our collective loss that they did not take up the opportunity.

It is vital that we go further in moving towards equality in all aspects of public and political life. Broader reform of the House of Lords is an essential step in achieving that. I was glad that the House of Lords (Hereditary Peers) Bill moved through this Chamber earlier this week, if perhaps not with the speed that we might have hoped. With not a single current hereditary peer being a woman, that legislation is an important step in addressing the gender imbalance of the other place, and we support it.

This new Parliament has seen a series of firsts: the first time the proportion of women elected to the House of Commons has surpassed 40%, the first time this country has had a female Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the first time we have had a black woman leading one of the main political parties in this country. While I am glad to support today's legislation, which will accelerate the move towards gender parity in our Lords Spiritual, it is vital that we continue to take steps to build a more equal and representative Parliament at all levels. In our recent general election, only 37% of candidates put forward by major parties were women.

We are grateful to organisations such as 50:50 Parliament and Centenary Action for their tireless work supporting more women into politics at all levels. Diverse Governments are more resilient and make better decisions. It is essential that our elected bodies are drawn from the widest possible pool of talent and experience, and that Parliament better reflects the country it serves.

More broadly, we are supportive of wider political reform, including of our upper Chamber. We believe that there are critical steps that the Government must take to strengthen democratic rights and encourage broader participation in politics. We will continue to urge the new Government to be bolder in modernising our upper Chamber, including by introducing the promised retirement age, implementing the findings of the Burns report and giving the Lords the proper legitimacy that our second Chamber should have through a democratic mandate. Political engagement is an historic low. Voter participation in our recent general election was the lowest since 2001—fewer than 60% of eligible voters cast their ballot. It is vital that we do all we can to restore public trust in Government, and broadening equal representation across both Chambers is a crucial step in doing that.

We look to the Government to support our pledges to modernise our electoral system, including by investing in electoral procedures to ensure that the electoral register is accurate and up to date. We will continue to call on the Government to scrap the Conservative party's voter ID scheme, and to expand political and democratic engagement by extending the right to vote to 16 and 17-year-olds.

In this year's general election, the highest ever proportion of women were elected to Parliament, and women now make up more than 40% of the House of Commons for the first time. It is important that both Houses of Parliament represent and reflect the diversity and richness of the people and cultures that make up our country. This legislation is important in moving towards more representative politics. The Liberal Democrats have been calling for significant reform of the House of Lords for

decades. Although we are proud to support the Bill, and grateful that it will improve the gender balance in the other place, ultimately we would like our second Chamber to be given a proper democratic mandate, and we will continue to push the Government to introduce bolder and broader parliamentary reforms.

1.21 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): My speech will be very brief. I welcome the progress made by the House earlier this week in voting to pass the House of Lords (Hereditary Peers) Bill in Committee and on Third Reading. I also welcome the Government's recognition of the importance of consecrating more female bishops and reflecting that composition in the other Chamber.

On a more local point, Stockport is famous for many things, one of which is the fact that the Church of England's first woman bishop was the Right Reverend Libby Lane, who served as the Bishop of Stockport between 2015 and 2019. She was mentioned by the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova). Stockport is known for many groundbreaking things, and that is just one of them. The Right Reverend Libby Lane now serves as the Bishop of Derby, and I want to place on the record my gratitude to her for all her work in Stockport and the various other places she has served. She was introduced to the House of Lords as a Lord Spiritual in July 2019, and she continues to do excellent and important work in the other place.

I usually do not speak in debates of this nature, but I recently met the Bishop of Manchester, the Right Reverend David Walker, at All Saints' parish church in my constituency. We discussed many issues, including the contribution of the Church, not just in Stockport but across Greater Manchester and the north-west. He made me aware of the importance of this legislation and of the impact it will have, and I want to place in *Hansard* my thanks to him for highlighting that to me.

I thank everyone not just in the Church of England, but in all churches across my Stockport constituency and Greater Manchester, for all they do to provide not just spiritual guidance but all sorts of other things, such as food banks and support with a number of other issues.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We now come to a maiden speech. I call Anna Gelderd.

1.23 pm

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): Meur ras—thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I begin by wishing His Majesty the King a very happy birthday—a sentiment that I am sure is shared on both sides of the House?

Standing here in this House, I am more aware than ever of the incredible privilege that it is to be here on behalf of South East Cornwall, a place that I love and am proud to call my home. I do not stand here alone; rather, I stand with those who came before me, inspired me or supported me. I am especially proud to be the first Labour MP to represent the area, a wonderful community filled with history, resilience and a deep local pride.

It is a love for the area and a steely determination to fight for its best interests that unites my predecessors

[Anna Gelderd]

and me. I pay tribute to Sheryll Murray for her work to champion public and rescue services and the local fishing industry, and to Colin Breed, who served before her.

I intend to represent our community by extending a hand to bridge political divides, and by serving with the determination and humility that I have seen illuminating the paths of all those I most admire in public service.

Today's debate offers me the opportunity to mention in particular some of those women who taught me that I, too, could stand, including our late friend Jo Cox, and the formidable Harriet Harman, both of whom I have had the honour of working with.

South East Cornwall is a stunningly beautiful rural constituency, defined by the natural boundaries of the River Fowey in the west and the River Tamar in the East, ancient moorland to the north, and beautiful Cornish coastlines to the south, including the unique Rame peninsula, perfect for sea swimming, surfing and sailing. It is a place alive with history, from Restormel castle in Lostwithiel, to the historic harbour at Polperro, whose winding lanes whisper of a history of pirates and smugglers.

Our economy is a story of resilience, woven from the threads of small businesses, including in the market gardens of the Tamar valley, tourism, farming and an inshore fishing fleet that deserves more recognition and support. The market town of Liskeard, at the geographical heart of the area, provides important places for people to meet and form new enterprises, such as Wildanet. Most importantly, it is the perfect place to find a Barnecutts pasty—and, unlike other Members of this House, I do know how to eat a pasty properly.

We look both to the west across Cornwall, and to the east beyond the Tamar, for many crucial jobs. The dockyard in Devonport is particularly important to the towns of Saltash and Torpoint, where many local residents are employed. Torpoint is also home to HMS Raleigh, which provides exceptional naval training and serves as a deep source of local pride.

South East Cornwall has a proud cultural heritage, celebrated in long-standing community traditions such as the Gorsedh—held in Callington for the first time in 40 years—the Black Prince parade and the Saltash May fair. That heritage is expressed through the arts at Sterts theatre and arts centre, Calstock Arts, and Maker Heights.

Communities there are tight-knit, but they are often kept apart geographically by both distance and the lack of transport connections. But don't get me started on transport problems in Cornwall, Madam Deputy Speaker—you can expect to hear from me again on that topic.

There are incredible people across the constituency who go the extra mile, with a community spirit found at Saltash Pride, in those working at food banks or in care homes, and at the Core, where I held my first surgery. It is a place rich in so many ways, but there are real challenges: above average rates of child poverty, fragile seasonal employment and house prices that are out of reach for many.

In my previous work, I have seen some of the big problems we face at home and abroad: the trap of extreme poverty that is so difficult to escape, the threat of instability and conflict, and the challenges posed by climate change. I have also seen the resolve and

determination of people to overcome those same challenges, and I have been struck by how the hardest of situations sometimes bring out the very best of us. That spirit can be found in organisations such as the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, which I was so proud to work for, or at local events such as Liskeard Unlocked, which celebrated the town's shared values of freedom, safety and solidarity with its twinned Ukrainian town of Kopychyntsi.

I know that caring for my mother throughout her prolonged and painful death from cancer—something that too many families face—has led me to this place. Without that experience, I would simply not be here. She told me to find solace in purpose, and I have. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] My family gave me a bedrock of certainty that anyone, anywhere, can make a positive difference. My grandad, injured in an industrial accident, would have me sit next to him on his green leather sofa after school to watch Prime Minister's questions. I have no doubt that he would be shocked but proud that I stand now by these green leather Benches, which felt so very far away from our lives and experiences. Clearly, children's earliest experiences are so formative, and early education is so pivotal—just look at the trouble that early experience has got me into now. I do not want where you are born to limit where you are going, or what you can do to be determined by who you know. Breaking down the barriers to opportunity is not a campaign slogan for me; it is a guiding principle, and what I intend to deliver for my community.

The beauty of our landscapes in our special corner of Cornwall is not just a backdrop to our lives; it is the backbone of our economy and integral to our identity and wellbeing. I am committed to supporting our farmers and our fishing industry—the lifeblood of our community. They provide our food security, and they have a critically important relationship with the landscape. I am committed to improving our transport links, which currently hamper growth and divide communities, and to securing better access to healthcare services and provision for special educational needs and disabilities in the constituency. I am also committed to preserving the rugged, distinct natural environment that so defines our region and brings huge economic value to our vital tourist industry.

Cornwall helped to power Britain's first industrial revolution, and it now stands ready to lead the new green industrial revolution, harnessing new technologies and the aspirations of our young people to create a sustainable future. South East Cornwall is both a gateway to Cornwall and a bridge to the rest of the UK, as embodied by the Tamar bridge. I intend also to be a bridge for our community, and to work tirelessly to connect Cornwall with the resources, opportunities and support that it deserves, so I stand here, ultimately, with gratitude for the incredible people of South East Cornwall. I see generosity and determination that inspire me daily. That is why I am here, and it is why I am honoured to be working to connect our past and our present, and to help build our future together.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The hon. Member for South East Cornwall gave a very authentic, powerful speech. She should be proud, as her mother and grandfather would be. We now come to the Front Benchers.

1.32 pm

Mr Holden: The hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd) made an incredibly moving speech. I remember her predecessor well; we served on the 1922 committee together. I thought her mention of the RNLI was particularly poignant. As a former transport Minister, I remember that the her predecessor and other hon. Members brought up the Tamar bridge regularly, and I am sure it is an issue that she will take forward. I was delighted to hear her mention pasties, a traditional food. I have my own pie and mash campaign at the moment, so perhaps we could work together on the protection of local foodstuffs.

The speeches from the hon. Members for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), and for Stockport (Navendu Mishra), mentioning some of the female bishops who have been trailblazers, were superb. I noted the comments of the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) about the former Prime Minister, who was our first British Asian Prime Minister, and about the Leader of the Opposition, who is the first black female leader of a major UK political party. I think we would like to say, in the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), that it is “not a big deal”, but that is the way things have worked out.

I caution the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee), who is famous already for his slightly cheeky contributions in the Chamber, to be careful what he wishes for when he suggests he would like more Opposition Members to speak in debates about bishops.

1.33 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Ms Abena Oppong-Asare): I begin by congratulating the shadow Paymaster General on his appointment to his role. It is a pleasure to close the debate on this focused but most important piece of legislation. I have very much enjoyed listening to the thoughtful contributions made by colleagues from all parts of the House, and I will do my best to respond to them in the time available.

As the Paymaster General said in his opening speech, this is a straightforward but important Bill requested by the Church. It simply extends for a further five years the arrangements agreed by this House in 2015. Significant progress has been made since then in addressing the gender imbalance on the Benches of the Lords Spiritual, but I hope that hon. Members will appreciate that a short extension is reasonable and proportionate to ensure that progress continues.

Members have made important and interesting contributions to the debate. I put on record my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd), who told an incredibly powerful story about her grandfather and her mother. Her personal story will have touched the lives of many today, and I share her ethos of breaking down barriers. She made some important points in her speech, and I believe her constituents appreciate their hard-working Member of Parliament. As a graduate of the women-only Murray Edwards College, Cambridge, she joins the ranks of the many notable and brilliant women making their mark on public life. She has spoken about the influence that Jo Cox and Harriet Harman—inspirational women—had on her.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) speaks with great passion and knowledge. His constituency has played an important role in our story,

because the Right Rev. Libby Lane, who was made Bishop of Stockport in 2015, was the first ever female bishop. Her consecration reminds us of the need for pioneers and trailblazers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) has become the 43rd Second Church Estates Commissioner. I met her this week to discuss the Bill, and I know she will use all her political and personal skills to provide a bridge between Parliament and the established Church at a difficult time for the Anglican communion. She will be brilliant in that role. She spoke powerfully about female bishops, and particularly about the importance of diversity and under-represented groups. The Church is looking at that, and I know that she will be a champion of those issues. The shadow Paymaster General rightly asked why the five-year timeframe had been selected. We believe that five years is an appropriate time, and we will review the arrangements in collaboration with the Church of England closer to 2030.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) has been a champion of diversity in the other place. She rightly asked whether we will be making wider progress. This Bill is narrow, and it is not part of the Government's wider House of Lords reform agenda. It was requested by the Church of England, so that it can extend arrangements put in place by the 2015 Act. As she knows, that Act is due to expire in May next year, so it is important that we introduce the Bill now. As the first step in a wider reform, the Government have introduced the House of Lords (Hereditary Peers) Bill, which I know the hon. Lady has spoken favourably about. That focused Bill will deliver the Government's manifesto commitment to bring about immediate reform by removing the right of the remaining hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords.

The Government are committed to other reforms of the House of Lords, as the hon. Lady rightly mentioned, including the introduction of a mandatory retirement age and a participation requirement, and changes to the appointments process, as well as a strengthening the circumstances in which disgraced Members can be removed. There is also a long-term commitment to replacing the other place with an alternative second Chamber that is more representative of the regions and nations. Given the nature and potential scale of these reforms, the Government will engage and consult on the proposals, seeking the input of the British public on how politics can best serve them.

As my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General noted when he opened the debate, this year marks the 10th anniversary of the ability to appoint women bishops in the Church of England. It is also another important anniversary: it is 30 years since the first women were ordained as Church of England priests; 32 women were ordained at Bristol cathedral in 1994. Over the past 30 years, the Church has made significant progress in valuing the leadership role that women can play in the life of the Church. This Bill simply extends existing provisions to ensure that progress can continue.

Marsha De Cordova: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her speech; she is setting out exactly why this small piece of legislation is so important. I also thank her for acknowledging that for 30 years, we have seen women being ordained. Does she agree that celebrating the

[Marsha De Cordova]

progress that women have made, not only in this place but in the Church, is crucial? I am very grateful to the Government for bringing forward the Bill, so that we can get it through.

Ms Oppong-Asare: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the importance of female representation, particularly in the Church. The long history of women's progress in this country teaches us one thing: it cannot be left to chance. That is why it is so important that we pass this Bill. Women must organise and keep up the pressure, and institutions must change. Our Parliament must also change; between 1918 and 2024, only 693 women have been elected as Members of this House. The hon. Member for Richmond Park mentioned female representation in Parliament. As of July 2024, there are 263 women in this House, the highest ever number. Female representation is at an all-time high of 40%, yet even now, we still need progress to be truly reflective of our society.

Mr Mark Sowards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I am really pleased to hear the Minister setting out exactly what a representative Chamber should look like. I was especially pleased to hear her comments to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), about the broader reforms to the other place that we are proposing. I was proud to be here on Tuesday night during the House of Lords (Hereditary Peers) Bill's Third Reading to talk about the amendments, and I was so proud to vote in favour of removing the 92 hereditary peers in the other place. My hon. Friend has made a commitment to reforming the other place. Do we have any timescales in mind, and can we make the commitment to the public and to this House that those reforms will come forward in the first term of a Labour Government?

Ms Oppong-Asare: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point, and for the part he played on Tuesday in making sure we could get that important Bill through. As he knows, it is an important step—the first step that we are taking towards reform of the House of Lords. I hope he recognises that as a Government, we are taking this very seriously. We are making sure that we deliver the Government's manifesto commitment to look at immediate reform, and particularly to remove the right of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords. I hope he can contribute again at a later stage when we progress those reforms.

As I have mentioned, this Bill is narrow. It amends an Act that was passed in 2015. We need to improve female representation, particularly when it comes to bishops in the House of Lords. As my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea mentioned, the contributions already made by female bishops show the significant changes they can make, particularly through the diversity that they bring. If we do not make those improvements, we will revert back to the way we were when it comes to representation in the House of Lords.

Navendu Mishra: The Minister is making an excellent speech. Can I echo the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova)? She welcomed the fact that there were more women bishops

in the Church of England, but also made a point about having women bishops of colour. I understand that there are several women bishops of colour in the Church of England now, but it is very important that more is done to make sure that people from under-represented segments and demographics are represented in the highest structures of the Church of England. Will the Minister join me in thanking our hon. Friend the Member for Battersea for making that point?

Ms Oppong-Asare: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. Racial diversity, as well as the wider representation of disabled people, are matters that I raised during a conversation with my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea in her new role, and with representatives of the Church of England. As my hon. Friend may know, it is for the Church to determine how bishops are appointed, and its representatives have mentioned that they are committed to increasing diversity among bishops. The Church is reviewing the pipeline for senior roles to encourage the greatest possible participation of under-represented groups.

Marsha De Cordova: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and all the interventions in this debate have been incredible. As she says, representation is something that the Church of England is now taking seriously. It led the way in setting up its racial justice taskforce, and it now has its racial justice commission that is working on this area. Representation is important, not just at the top of the Church but all the way down to the parish and diocese levels. We need greater representation, not just of women but of those from black and ethnic minority communities, as well as disabled people. I am sure my hon. Friend agrees that the Church has got to get this right.

Ms Oppong-Asare: My hon. Friend is right to raise that point. That is why I am delighted that she is in the role that she now holds—I know that she will champion this issue really well. Representation at all levels is important, and I will be looking to see what the Church of England does to strengthen its diversity in that area.

This Bill is about the role of a number of Lords Spiritual. It simply aims to extend the provisions of the 2015 Act to ensure that more female bishops enter into the House of Lords.

Mr Holden: Reflecting some of the comments that the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) has made, would it not be great to see some more Cross-Bench peers in the House of Lords drawn from the retired bishops, particularly the female bishops? Perhaps they could go through the appointments process for people who have contributed to public life.

Ms Oppong-Asare: I thank the hon. Member for that helpful suggestion, which could be examined at the next stage. I know that he did a lot of work in this area, particularly as an adviser when this policy was being taken forward in the House of Lords, so I welcome his insight into this area.

The contributions to this debate have been extremely powerful. I know that there have been lengthy conversations about this Bill in the other place.

Navendu Mishra: I am very grateful to the Minister for allowing me a second intervention. She has made comments about the first woman bishop, the Bishop of Stockport. In her role as a Minister of the Crown, will she officially congratulate the Right Rev. Libby Lane, who serves in the other Chamber, and mark the point I am making about the wonderful constituency of Stockport?

Ms Oppong-Asare: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point—he is a trailblazer for his constituency of Stockport, and is very passionate about the first female bishop, who I believe is a trailblazer and a role model to many women up and down the country.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for giving way. I will take the opportunity to try to be a trailblazer for my constituency of Harlow, where we have some fantastic women representatives in the Church. I particularly pay tribute to the Rev. Jokey Poyntz, who during the terrible pandemic did so much to support residents in my constituency by delivering food parcels, and who continues to champion my community.

Ms Oppong-Asare: I thank my hon. Friend for championing the women in his constituency. On that note, I would like to champion the females who work hard in my constituency to ensure that it is well represented. As my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea and others have said, diversity is important across the community. If we do not ensure that the House of Lords bishops look like us, how will we ensure that we can advocate effectively for constituents?

Valerie Vaz (Walsall and Bloxwich) (Lab) rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. As many colleagues are interested in this debate, may I encourage interventions to be relevant to the debate that is taking place?

Ms Oppong-Asare: I give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall and Bloxwich (Valerie Vaz).

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Minister, who is doing a fantastic job of ensuring, through the Bill, that women are represented at every level; in the 21st century, we should not be talking about firsts for women.

In the spirit of colleagues who have intervened already, may I ask my hon. Friend to recognise the brilliant role played by the first black woman to be Speaker's Chaplain here in the House of Commons? The Reverend Rose Hudson-Wilkin then rose to be Bishop of Dover; I am thinking also of the Reverend Tricia Hillas, who also

served as Speaker's Chaplain. Parliament is seen as an important place for the representation of women and I very much support the Minister in ensuring that the Bill makes progress.

Ms Oppong-Asare: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising those two trailblazers, who are an inspiration to me and many other women.

I conclude by saying that we should never take our foot off the gas and never rest on our laurels. This is a time to ensure that we in Parliament do what we can to improve female representation.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Ms Oppong-Asare: I will not at the moment.

As I have mentioned on many occasions, this is a simple Bill to extend provisions and ensure that progress continues to be reflected on the Benches of the Lords Spiritual. We have a long way to go in improving female representation, but this country teaches us one thing: this cannot be left to chance. I urge everyone to support the Bill and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

LORDS SPIRITUAL (WOMEN) ACT 2015 (EXTENSION) BILL [LORDS]: (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015 (Extension) Bill [Lords]:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

Proceedings in Committee, on Consideration and on Third Reading

(2) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.

(3) Any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

(4) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to proceedings on Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(5) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(*Anna McMorin.*)

Question agreed to.

Aircraft Noise: Local Communities

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

1.52 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a pleasure to finally begin the Adjournment debate. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for granting this important and timely debate.

As the MP for a very vocal airport community, I welcome the Minister to his role and reassure him that he will be hearing from me a great deal over the coming Parliament. This topic is close to my constituents' hearts. Every morning, at 4.30 am, they hear jet engines above their heads; every year, a Heathrow airport executive threatens to bring back the third runway; and every decade, a new proposal to change the flight paths is put forward.

My constituents are not alone. In the UK, more than 23% of the British population live between two and 10 miles from an airport. Although they accept that aircraft noise is a fact of life, they should not be asked to tolerate constant attempts to increase the number of flights above their homes. In the opening months of this new Parliament, Labour has a chance to step away from the damaging policies of the past and build a new relationship with airport communities—a relationship in which the needs of local people and our environment are genuinely balanced against the demands of the aviation industry.

To begin rebalancing the relationship, I urge the Department for Transport to consider three requests: first, to acknowledge the health impacts of night flights on airport communities and work to ban them above heavily populated areas; secondly, to accept that the expansion of Heathrow airport would fly in the face of Britain's climate targets and have an unacceptable impact on my constituents in Richmond Park and elsewhere across London and the south-east; and thirdly, to recognise that any proposals to change flight paths above London and the south-east should be accompanied by a proposal for a "do minimum" approach, ensuring that people do not have to accept change merely for the sake of change.

I turn first to night flights, which are the most intrusive form of aircraft noise. There is clear evidence that they harm the physical health of residents who live under flight paths. Long-term exposure to nocturnal aircraft noise is strongly linked to sleep disorders and broader health impacts.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way on that point and for securing this incredibly important debate. Like her constituents, the residents of Twickenham, Teddington, Whitton and the Hamptons are very concerned about the impact of aircraft noise above them. Does she agree that, given that the Civil Aviation Authority itself has acknowledged evidence that long-term aircraft noise has a harmful effect on children's memory, sustained attention, reading comprehension and reading ability, for the sake of their health we need strict restrictions on night flights across our constituencies and all of west London? Frankly, at the moment these massive jet engines are flouting the rules overnight on a regular basis.

Sarah Olney: My hon. Friend is right. She speaks passionately on behalf of her constituents in Twickenham, who I know are blighted by these issues just as much as my constituents in Richmond Park. She is right about the health impacts of long-term exposure to nocturnal aircraft noise, which is strongly linked to sleep disorders and broader health impacts.

For each additional 10 dB of night-time aircraft noise that communities are exposed to, there is an increase of between 14% and 69% in residents' risk of high blood pressure, increasing the risk of strokes and heart attacks. Other researchers have found links between long-term exposure to aircraft noise and an increased risk of obesity, depression and cardiovascular issues.

The human cost of these flights is substantial, but when I have raised this issue in the House, Ministers have fallen back on a study by York Aviation that argued that night flights add billions to our economy. That study has been repeatedly challenged on both its outcomes and methodology, and I urge the Minister to instruct his officials to examine the wider body of evidence.

Researchers at the transport research service and consultancy CE Delft found that a ban on night flights would harm the national economy only if the passengers who currently arrive on scheduled flights before 6 am were not transferred to other flights. In addition, the Heathrow Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise has pointed out that estimates of the value of night flights often massage definitions of night-time jobs, which inflate key figures. In the light of that, I urge the Government to commit to commissioning a full independent analysis on the impact of night flights on our economy, residents' physical health and local people's mental wellbeing, to inform a potential ban on night flights at Heathrow.

While night flights are a constant concern to my residents, the spectre of the third runway continues to hang over south-west London. *Hansard* shows that the third runway has been mentioned no fewer than 115 times in this House, and has been the topic of three debates, two early-day motions and countless open letters. Despite the efforts of dozens of MPs, the last Government resolutely refused to abandon the project. They said that we should ignore the 210 million tonnes of carbon dioxide that it would generate every year, the £100 billion it would cost to clean up the damage that the runway would do to our environment, and the impact it would have on air quality in our communities.

Munira Wilson: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is no way that this Government can meet their net zero and climate commitments if they give the green light to a third runway at Heathrow, as has been widely reported? Indeed, the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero has been on record in the past as having been very against a third runway at Heathrow. He should be fighting the corner of the environment and our planet, and the health and wellbeing of our constituents, by standing up to the Department for Transport's giving any green light to a third runway at Heathrow.

Sarah Olney: Again, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. In the past week the Prime Minister gave new impetus to the achievement of our net zero targets, and it is essential that we have another look at the damage that a third runway would cause at Heathrow. We must

seriously re-examine the case for proceeding and, as my hon. Friend says, also look at the impact it would have on our communities.

A meta-analysis of 70 studies published between 2000 and 2020 has shown that researchers consistently find elevated levels of ultra-fine particulate matter in airport communities. Constant exposure to those particulates can lead to decreased lung function, oxidative DNA damage, and premature death. Allowing the third runway and the 260,000 flights that it will add to London's skies is not only an annoyance to residents; it is a risk to their health.

The third runway would have further far-reaching consequences other than simply tainting the air that my constituents breathe. At COP29 this week, the Prime Minister vowed to cut UK emissions by 81% before 2035, but his own Chancellor has refused to take the third runway off the table. I know from reading the 115 references to the third runway in *Hansard* that Ministers from both main parties are happy to avoid answering questions from Opposition MPs. For that reason I urge the Minister to consider the words of his colleague, the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, who said:

"I raise the issue of the Heathrow third runway gingerly, but if we are so serious about this climate emergency, I do not see how we cannot look at all the things that the Government and the private sector are doing and ask whether they make sense in a net zero world."—[*Official Report*, 24 June 2019; Vol. 662, c. 522.]

In the last Division on the third runway, seven members of the current Cabinet, including the Prime Minister, opposed expansion. I urge the Minister to work across Departments to ensure that Government policy reflects their commitments to our local communities and our planet before any decision on the third runway is made.

Finally, night flights and the third runway have been constant sources of concern to my residents over the past decade, but they must now contend with the Government's new proposals for airspace modernisation. Although I understand that the proposals are intended to improve efficiency at the airport and bring aviation in London into the 21st century, I ask for caution. Last year, the London Assembly passed a motion calling on the airport to recognise the damage that its proposals would have on Richmond Park's wildlife and ecology. The motion highlighted that redirecting 60,000 planes over London's largest nature reserve flies in the face of decades of conservation efforts. Indeed, the noise from long-haul flights and the additional pollution from fuel dumping could change that fragile ecosystem for years to come.

At the same time, airspace modernisation would lay the groundwork for an increase in the number of aircraft movements at Heathrow, and expose new communities across south-west London to aircraft noise directly above their homes for the first time. The proposed UK airspace design service will of course help to guide the development of those new flight paths, but it is essential that the public are given a genuine chance to choose between the proposals. When the proposed flight path systems are put to public consultation next year, I urge the Minister to ensure that residents can choose a "do minimum" option. New guidance systems can be integrated, and small amendments to current systems made, but ultimately there should be an option to maintain the path in a roughly similar location. We should not ask communities simply to accept change for the sake of

change. They deserve a real choice over the future of their skies, rather than a forced decision between bad options.

London is one of the most overflowed capital cities in the western world. Hundreds of thousands of Londoners across the city experience the negative impacts of aircraft noise, yet the Government tiptoe around real measures that would improve residents' lives. By banning night flights, abandoning the third runway, and giving our constituents a genuine choice over the positioning of flight paths, Ministers would demonstrate to London's airport communities that we are being heard. The previous Government's policy on the aviation sector was marked by an inability to stand up for the rights of communities in the face of Heathrow and other airports. The Minister now has a chance to be better than his predecessors, to put people before profit, and to consider what is really best for the capital and airport communities across the UK.

2.4 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): I congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) on securing this debate about the impact of aircraft noise on local communities, and I thank her for her speech. Aviation noise presents a sensitive issue. I grew up under the flight path to Manchester airport, and I remember the BAC one-elevens, the Tridents and Concorde. As a school child I saw the space shuttle do a low pass on a jumbo jet, which inspired me for the rest of my life. Thank God we do not have those planes any more, given the smell that they emitted. However, we need to strike a fair balance between the impact of aviation on the local environment and communities, and the economic benefits that flights bring. That is the challenge for aviation noise policy.

The hon. Lady spoke passionately about the impact of aviation on noise levels, and I recognise that noise from aircraft, particularly at night, impacts on the local community and, as she said, can impact on people's physical and mental wellbeing. Major airports with more than 50,000 movements per year are obliged under the Environmental Noise (England) Regulations 2006 to produce noise action plans. Noise action plans act as a driver for aircraft noise management and for the mitigation that is required around airports. I am pleased to report that all major airports within scope of the regulations have now produced their noise action plans for 2024 to 2028. With the exception of the noise action plan for Manchester airport in my constituency, which was submitted later, I can confirm that those noise action plans have now been adopted by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

The Heathrow airport noise action plan has been published, following consultation with local stakeholders, as the hon. Lady rightly said. It is supplemented by a commitment to commission and support research, and a focus on improving the way that the airport communicates and engages with local communities. Heathrow sees that last element as pivotal in helping it to understand and address key priorities for local people. Heathrow also has a sustainability plan that covers a wide range of issues related to noise management. The airport has set a clear objective to reduce by 2030 the number of people who are sleep-disturbed and highly annoyed, compared with its baseline of 2019. The airport has been working to develop, test and finalise a new package

[Mike Kane]

of noise insulation, vortex protection and home relocation support, known as the quieter neighbourhood support scheme. Heathrow's residential insulation scheme covers 100% of insulation costs up to £34,000 for homes most affected by noise.

Sarah Olney: I am grateful to the Minister for highlighting the various packages that are available for people affected by noise. As he will appreciate, a number of my constituents are in that position, yet many are finding that some of those packages are insufficient and difficult to access. Will he meet me to discuss some of those individual cases?

Mike Kane: I am happy to meet all individual Members who want to improve the quality of people's lives around our ports and airports.

Heathrow uses a differential charging structure for aircraft operating at the airport. The structure encourages the use of best-in-class aircraft, imposing higher charges for noisier aircraft and lower charges for quieter ones. Heathrow encourages the use of quieter planes by adjusting the differential in night and post-midnight charges for unscheduled operations, with the aim of reducing those operations after 11.30 pm.

The Government, too, are committed to research into aviation noise, and two studies are under way. One study that has been commissioned is on the effects of aviation noise on sleep disturbance and annoyance and how they vary at different times at night. The study is a collaboration between St George's University London, the National Centre for Social Research, Noise Consultants Ltd and the University of Pennsylvania, and is the first study of aviation noise effects on sleep disturbance in the UK for 30 years. The first stage of the aviation night noise effects—"Annie"—study involved a cross-sectional survey of 4,000 people who live near eight UK airports to assess the association between aircraft noise exposure at night and subjective assessments of sleep quality and annoyance. That stage of the study is currently going through peer review, and we expect to publish it next year. The second stage involves an observational study of individuals recruited from the survey to assess the association between aircraft noise exposure and objective sleep quality. That involves assessments of sleep disturbance and sound level measurements in participants' bedrooms. That stage of the study is currently in the field.

Taken together, these pieces of evidence will be used to inform future policies for managing night-time aviation noise exposure and to assist with the management and mitigation of health impacts on local communities. They will also support any wider assessment of the costs and benefits of night flying. Our priority remains to deliver a high-quality, robust evidence base, and we are taking all the necessary steps to deliver that. We are now working on the basis that we will publish the full evidence base from the "Annie" study in autumn 2026.

Sarah Olney: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way again. I am pleased to hear that there will be a proper study of the impact of aviation noise on sleep disruption, and I very much look forward to that publication. He may have missed the early part of my speech, where I asked for a much more robust study of the economic benefits of night flights. Will he comment further on that?

Mike Kane: I will come to that, and I look forward to meeting the hon. Member, because I would like to have a safe cycle ride around Richmond Park one of these days. I will be raising that with the constituency MP, and I think it could help with climate mitigation and climate change. I look forward to her views on that.

As I have acknowledged, noise from aircraft, particularly at night, impacts on local communities. At the same time, night flights are also a vital part of global aviation and provide significant economic benefit, not just to the capital city but, as we know, to the whole of the UK. The whole UK relies on Heathrow as our only hub airport to keep the flow of people, goods and services moving, supporting thousands of jobs as a result. With that in mind, for several decades the Government have set out noise controls, including restrictions on night operations at Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted.

The House can imagine my surprise, on becoming the new Minister, to realise that I had direct powers over the south-east three, and no powers over the rest of the nation. That will hopefully change in the years to come. Those airports are designated for noise purposes under the Civil Aviation Act 1982. That control reflects the need to balance the impacts on communities with the benefits to the UK economy. We also know that Heathrow is one of our major hub airports for cargo and freight to keep this country fuelled, supplied and fed. At other airports, the noise controls are set by local ordinance and local competent planning authorities.

The current night-flight regime limits the number of flights for the purpose of noise management. The night-flight restrictions significantly reduce the number of flights that could otherwise operate within the night quota period between 11.30 pm and 6 am. Earlier this year, the Department for Transport consulted on proposals for the next night-flight regime at Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted airports, which will commence in October 2025, a year or so from now. The consultation proposes that movements and quota limits for Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted would remain the same as now for a three-year period covering October 2025 to October 2028. That is while we await evidence that could support change in the future. I thank the hon. Member for Richmond Park for her response to the consultation, and I hope soon to be in a position to announce a decision on the next night-flight regime.

At Heathrow, the number of movements permitted in the night quota period has not changed for many years. During that time, aircraft have become quieter, as I said at the start of the speech, and the overall noise footprint of the airport has shrunk. Progress has been made. At Heathrow, for example, between 2006 and 2019, there was a reduction of 21% in the number of households exposed to aircraft noise within the London 55 dB noise contour area. The noise footprint of new-generation aircrafts, such as the Airbus A350 and the Boeing 737 MAX, is typically 50% smaller on departure and 30% smaller on arrival than the aircraft they are replacing. I talk with manufacturers all the time about the future of flight and how we can carry on reducing the noise footprint of these vehicles. Overall, noise from aircraft movements is expected to continue to fall in the future compared with today's levels.

I will briefly touch on airspace modernisation, which is a key plank of our manifesto. It is one of our key commitments, along with sustainable aviation fuel. We have

an analogue system in our skies in the UK in a digital age. The system was designed closer to the time that Yuri Gagarin went into space than today. A pilot who travelled through time, coming in the TARDIS back to the future, would still be flying the same flight paths that they would recognise from more than 60, 70 or 80 years ago. That has to change if we are to maximise the benefits to aviation and growth and the carbon reduction we could bring, if we just got the flights not to circle over the hon. Member's constituency, but to fly in a straight line point-to-point.

Munira Wilson: I heard the Minister from a sedentary position call my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) a luddite when she made her point about airspace modernisation.

Sarah Olney: A luddite?

Munira Wilson: Yes, I am afraid so. The Minister is making the point that we need modernisation. I say to him respectfully that I, my hon. Friend and our constituents recognise the need for innovation and to move with technology as it changes. Of course we want to reduce carbon emissions, and we support a better Heathrow—not a bigger Heathrow—as we understand its importance to the economy, but on airspace modernisation we could still achieve some of the benefits by adopting a “do minimum” approach, gaining benefits from modernisation while not coming up with lots of new flight paths and really intensifying noise over certain areas that might not be overflown at the moment. We have seen how in other countries airspace modernisation has led to noise sewers. Will he offer reassurance to the

residents of Teddington, Twickenham, the Hamptons and St Margarets that those places will not end up becoming noise sewers? Will he please commit to a “do minimum” approach and transparency on the process?

Mike Kane: Not for a moment did I suggest that the hon. Members would throw their sabots—as in sabotage—into the mill to grind it up. I do expect co-operation on this. I think that we can make life better for all people, and a rising tide floats all boats. The process will be open and transparent. I have already announced the setting up of the UK airspace design service, which will go out for consultation. I expect Members to be fully involved in shaping its work over the next few years.

As we look to decarbonise our skies and improve them in the ways I just mentioned, there is so much to be gained. We can move on Scottish airspace and northern England airspace. We are already moving on south-west airspace. The south-east will be the hard bit to crack, and that is why the service will focus on that. I hope that we can work together to get that done, hopefully in this Parliament; if not, hopefully early in the next one.

The Government recognise the impact that aviation noise can have on local communities. At the same time, we live in a fully interconnected global world, and the aviation sector has material value for the UK economy. The Government continue to strive for the correct balance between the impacts of aviation on the local community and the economic benefits that flight brings.

Question put and agreed to.

2.17 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 14 November 2024

[ANDREW ROSINDELL *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Respiratory Health

1.30 pm

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

That this House has considered respiratory health.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Rosindell. I look forward to hon. Members' contributions to this important debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. I was before the Committee a week ago on Tuesday with three requests, and I was well looked after. This is the first of my three debates; the second is on 28 November in the main Chamber, and I am waiting to hear when the third will be. I hope to get more in after that—I will keep at it.

I declare an interest: I chair the all-party parliamentary group for respiratory health, and it is an issue that has affected my family. I became very aware of respiratory health because of how it affected my son. Did I understand it all? Probably not, but I understood it better from interacting with him. He is now 34 years old and married with two children, but he still has issues with his respiratory health.

I am delighted to be able to raise the issue. I look forward to all the contributions, particularly the response from the Minister for Secondary Care. It is always a pleasure to see her in her place: it makes my day and everybody else's, I am sure. I know that she has a deep interest in the subject, so I am pretty sure that we will be encouraged by what she tells us. I am also pleased to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), in his place. He and I have discussed the matter on a couple of occasions this week: we focused on what we would love to see come out of the debate.

This debate is not about us as Members; it is about our constituents and those who contact us. It will be on behalf of all the people in this great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. As chair of the APPG, I will cover issues around asthma, severe asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and silicosis. The APPG has been conducting an inquiry on silicosis in particular. We have had meetings, usually on Zoom, with at least 20 contributors; the hon. Member for Blaydon and Consett (Liz Twist) and I have attended those meetings regularly.

I will frame my comments around the latest initiatives and the current policy direction, but I first want to say a few thank yous. I am indebted to Sarah Sleet and her wonderful team at Asthma and Lung UK for their outstanding help and ongoing support. They have been enormously helpful to me and the APPG and, I suspect, to other Members present. I welcome their latest report, "A Mission for Lung Health", which was launched on Tuesday. I was there, as were some Members who are here today and many others who unfortunately cannot be.

I met Dr Jonathan Fuld, the national clinical director for respiratory disease, for the first time to get his expert advice and counsel. I had always seen him on Zoom on a laptop, but on Tuesday I met him in real life: we were able to shake hands and say hello. My thanks also go to Dr Richard Russell of the British Thoracic Society for his insights and opinion, and I pay tribute to the ongoing work of our expert stakeholder groups, which comprise senior clinicians, industry professional bodies and other experts. Whenever we have that vast amount of knowledge, experience and input on a Zoom meeting, we learn quickly: I learned quickly what the issues were.

There have been some very welcome developments in respiratory health recently, including the development of a new guideline for asthma, which is due to be launched soon as a collaboration among the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, the Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network and the BTS. The seasonal flu and covid vaccination programme appears to have been well planned and is rolling out well this year. Great credit and thanks are due to NHS England for its great work. Back home, where this is a devolved matter, I got two injections in one day: one for covid in the left arm and the ordinary one for flu in the right. It was like a conveyor belt: people were getting it every couple of minutes. It really is wonderful to see how well things can work when things go in the right direction.

The battle with smoking-related respiratory illnesses continues. The Government's plans on smoking cessation, including through the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, are welcome. I understand that the Bill's Report stage is coming next week, or certainly the week after. We hope that it will have a big impact in more deprived areas and on outcomes. When we were doing our research, having meetings and doing an inquiry into the matter, it became clear that it was more of an issue in deprived areas and areas of disadvantage. I will say a wee bit more about that later.

I hope that this debate will help to highlight World COPD Day, which falls on 20 November. I am sure that the Minister is well aware of the headline figures on respiratory health in the UK. They are worrying. The reason why this debate is so important is that the evidential base tells us that things are not getting better. That is why I look to the Minister for some succour, support and easement of mind.

Respiratory disease is the third biggest killer in England. In the UK, 7.2 million people have asthma, while 3 million are affected by COPD. These are not just figures; they are people, and their families are affected as well. The UK has a higher death rate due to respiratory illness than the OECD average, and the highest death rate in Europe. My goodness! If that does not scare us, it should. Over the past 10 years, more than 12,000 people have died from asthma. All those deaths were preventable. That is another reason why we are having this debate: because if we can prevent deaths, we should. It is important to put this on the record.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): Thank you for your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. As an asthma sufferer, I know that one of the key elements of ensuring that we get the care we need is an annual survey with a clinician or GP about how our symptoms are either deteriorating or improving. I know many asthma sufferers who are not getting that annual review with their doctor. Some

[Chris Bloore]

are going years without any sort of review of the deterioration of their symptoms. Given the really concerning number of people who die in this country from asthma attacks, is it not time that we did more to ensure that people get the yearly reviews they really need?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Member is absolutely right. If there are deaths of people with asthma that are attributable to not getting regular examinations or appointments with doctors or consultants, that is an issue that must be addressed. I am quite sure that the Minister is taking notes and that her civil servants and her Parliamentary Private Secretary will ensure that information is contributed to the debate.

NHS waiting lists for respiratory care have risen by 263% over the past decade. Poorly controlled respiratory disease results in hospital admissions doubling during the winter period. COPD exacerbations are the second most common cause of emergency hospital admissions. These are worrying figures—as worrying as the issue to which the hon. Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) refers. New research presented at the European Respiratory Society has shown that the biologics uptake for severe asthma is disastrously poor: the national median for patients in England with severe asthma between 2016 and 2023 is 16%. The uptake varied widely among integrated care boards: it was between 2% and 29% against a target of 50% to 60%. These are worrying figures that indicate an unfortunate trend that should concern us all.

The burden of respiratory disease falls disproportionately on the most deprived. Adults in the poorest 10% of the country are more than two and a half times more likely to have COPD than the most affluent. The 10% most deprived children are four times more likely to require emergency admission to hospital due to asthma than the least deprived. Those figures show a fall-down and a need to focus on those areas.

Lung conditions, especially asthma and COPD, cost the NHS £9.6 billion in direct costs this year and every year. That represents 3.4% of total NHS expenditure. Those conditions result in 12.7 million work days being lost every year. The stats indicate a massive problem that needs to be addressed. The illness and premature death associated with them causes reductions in productivity totalling some £4.2 billion a year, and the conditions have an overall impact of £13.8 billion on the English economy.

All these stats tell us that we have a major problem. I ask the Minister that the NHS prioritise the issue. I understand that it was prioritised by the previous Government, but that that was not acted on because of the election, so I ask respectfully that it be prioritised in our strategy for the time ahead. Improving respiratory outcomes will help to achieve the Government's ambitions to improve the nation's health, to halve the disparities in health outcomes, to eliminate waiting lists, to break the winter crisis cycle and to enable everyone to live well for longer.

I have a number of questions for the Minister; I think my staff have sent her a draft of my speech and the questions I will ask. Will she confirm that respiratory health will be a priority for the Government? That is my first big ask. The APPG strongly supports the Secretary of State's three shifts, which were announced following

the Darzi report. I very much welcome that report, and the Secretary of State has done extremely well: it was a difficult portfolio to take on, but he has shown that he has the ideas to take it forward strategically. I hope the Minister can provide an idea of how that will happen for those with respiratory health issues.

The Darzi report proposes a shift from analogue to digital. We certainly have to improve the system that is used for our data and for healthcare more broadly, as the Secretary of State has said in the Chamber; I was very encouraged when I heard him talking about that shift. The other two shifts proposed are from hospital to community and from treatment to prevention. Those three should be front and centre, and they all have an important part to play in improving outcomes. The Government are right to highlight the impact of inequalities and deprivation on health. We strongly support their plans to achieve that through the three shifts, with which they have set a strategic course.

The statistics are clear: we have to improve outcomes for the most vulnerable in society. Our No. 1 duty as elected representatives is to look out for our constituents, particularly those who are vulnerable—that is why we are elected representatives. Our duty is to look after those who are less well-off, those who are physically vulnerable, those who are disabled and those who have other issues in their life.

Mortality rates from respiratory disease are higher among disadvantaged groups and areas of social deprivation, higher exposure to air pollution, higher smoking rates, poor housing conditions and exposure to occupational hazards. That has to be a major focus for us all. The trial of neighbourhood health centres could offer a significant shift from hospital to the community; the Government are considering that, and it is a good step in the right direction. We hope that we will enable a better focus for diagnosis and treatment of respiratory health, which could help to reduce inequalities. As the burden of respiratory disease disproportionately affects the most deprived parts of this great country, winter pressures are higher in those areas, so the centres need to be able to match the local challenges. Will the Minister indicate how that will happen?

Part of the challenge relates to the provision of spirometry testing, which is an essential diagnostic tool for asthma and for COPD. Community diagnostic centres currently offer very few spirometry tests; some offer none at all. I ask the Minister to confirm that spirometry will be widely rolled out, especially in deprived areas where we need its use to be widespread in primary care. It would be extremely helpful if spirometry could receive sustainable funding to be equitably delivered. I welcome the Minister's thoughts.

As the Minister will be aware, the national screening committee has recommended introducing a targeted lung cancer screening programme across the UK. However, the screening programme only explores the possibility of lung cancer; unfortunately, it does not focus on addressing incidental findings of undiagnosed COPD identified during the screening. Including those findings would enable neighbourhood centres to help deliver better care for COPD.

We are aware of some work being undertaken in Hull to roll incidental findings into potential COPD diagnoses. I ask the Minister and NHS England to look closely at the outcomes of that study, which I believe will give

some direction on what needs to be done in the United Kingdom. We are deeply grateful to those in Hull who are working on COPD diagnosis.

The national screening committee's guidance on COPD has not been reviewed since 2019. I ask the Minister whether there are any plans to revisit that and to bring it up to date. It is five years since it was done, and the figures indicate a worrying trend of more disease. We need to have that in place.

Overprescribing of SABA inhalers—short-acting beta agonists—remains a big problem. Guidelines would be of enormous help. I ask the Minister to ensure full support for the NHS to implement new guidelines.

The APPG has been looking at the impact of inequality for some time. We highlighted that at our COPD event in the House at the end of last year. It was a well-attended event with constructive comments. As we always do in the APPG, off the back of that, we are looking forward more strategically, with a number of asks. We intend to hold regional events to enable local clinicians to inform us what more needs to be done. There is nothing better than asking clinicians the best way forward. They know. They deal with patients daily, and we deal regularly with constituents, and that helps us to focus attention, specifically on prevention.

The number of asthma deaths is far too high. They are worryingly high, as the hon. Member for Redditch mentioned. It has to be a priority for us all to reduce deaths as quickly as possible and for that to be an integral marker in the 10-year plan. The Secretary of State is giving us a 10-year plan. Perhaps the Minister can tell us today where the asthma and respiratory health focus is in that 10-year plan. It needs to have that focus, and I hope we get that response from the Minister today.

We are 10 years on from the national review of asthma deaths report and very little has changed in terms of asthma outcomes. A recent study showed that people on lower incomes reported greater use of oral corticosteroids than people on higher incomes. These findings highlight that there may be an increase in OCS prescriptions for people with asthma and COPD in more deprived areas. The study results are similar to those reported in the 2019 survey by Asthma and Lung UK. I again urge the Minister to keep an eye on that study, to see what lessons we can learn. I know the Minister is committed to making things better and we support her in her quest to do so, but I believe there are many who have helpful contributions on how that can be done.

The APPG also welcomes improvements in inhaler technology, specifically the move to combination inhalers, which will ultimately eliminate the use of twin inhalers. That should benefit both asthma and COPD patients and will contribute to the NHS's net zero targets. There are lots of things that have to be done. We all subscribe to the net zero targets—they need to be addressed—and this is a way of achieving two goals in one.

We welcome the Government's commitment to increasing the NHS workforce. That is very good news as well. We will see how that looks in the workforce plan next year. I ask the Minister to ensure that with a significant increase in staffing levels in primary care, we will see an end to untrained staff undertaking annual asthma reviews. I do not want to be too critical—that is not in my nature—but when there is an anomaly we have to address, it has to be said.

The APPG warmly welcomes the promise of the outcomes of the 10-year plan, and we will submit our response to the consultation. To have any real impact on respiratory health, though, we believe the plan has to be disease specific and contain suitable outcome measures for respiratory health. Will the Minister confirm whether the plan will include disease-specific measures for respiratory health? Again, I ask the Minister to benchmark metrics at the start of the plan and to factor in regular outcome updates at three, seven and 10 years. If we do that at those points, we can chart the progress, or perhaps the lack of progress, and make improvements. The metrics could include fewer asthma deaths; reduced hospital admissions for asthma and COPD, especially winter admissions; prescription data; and reduced incidence of asthma and COPD in the most deprived areas. Interim data outcomes will enable us to determine whether the plan is on track to deliver the outcomes we all want to see.

The use of biologics is of particular concern to the APPG and features regularly in our meetings. I am sorry to say that figures on the use of biologics in England are simply dreadful. The national median by patients with severe asthma in England between 2016 and 2023 sat at 16%, and the uptake varied widely among ICBs at between 2% and 29% against an uptake expectation within the clinical community of 50% to 60%. It just does not seem to be working. Biologics treatment has been described by our clinical advisers as life-saving for severe asthma patients. There is both wide regional variation in access, and unacceptable delays to the start of treatment. Many patients who need urgent treatment have to wait years to get access to the services that will prescribe biologics to them. That is an inefficient use of NHS resource and means that the health of patients is deteriorating while they wait for the right treatment. I do not want to see that, hon. Members do not want to see that, and I know the Minister does not want to see that either.

We need more easily accessible severe asthma services. Again, I would be much obliged if the Minister could meet us to look at how we can provide better asthma care for those with the highest burden of disease. I hope that the NHS innovation and adoption strategy will put forward solutions to tackle low and variable uptake and the access to innovative treatments, such as severe asthma biologics. The APPG would like to see a funded transformation with the health innovation networks and clinical leadership on the implementation of NICE guidance on respiratory health at neighbourhood level and on the delivery of biologics.

We are being constructive—the Minister knows that I will always be constructive because I believe we need to move forward together and ask the questions. I note the Secretary of State's recent remarks on data sharing and the call by Asthma and Lung UK for greater data sharing in its report, which urges the Government to

“Improve data collection and analysis across the care pathway to bring together primary and secondary data, and make high quality, publicly available data which will help ICSs target care where it is needed and ensure accountability”.

We fully support that, and I do not think there is anybody in this room who would not support that, because it is absolutely the way forward.

We are also looking closely at the recent increase in silicosis cases around the country, especially in relation to engineered stone. It is something that maybe not everybody is aware of, although I suspect those in this room are. There is a real threat that the rise in what are

[Jim Shannon]

entirely preventable cases may add considerably to local health pressures. The Secretary of State has been clear that we need to address the waiting lists and take more action to prevent cases, and that is something I have suggested needs to be done as well. There are a number of recommendations in our silicosis report, and a key recommendation concerns wider data sharing between primary and secondary care.

The APPG will hold a roundtable in the new year to ensure a timely discussion to inform the 10-year plan. I ask the Minister if she would be most kind and put it in her diary and come along. We are not here to give the Minister a hard time, but to take her contribution and help us to move forward together. The Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrke-Smith), is not nodding because she cannot do that for the Minister, but she is indicating—I will send over the date, if that is okay.

Since 2015, 250 to 300 patients have been diagnosed with CF each year. Despite medical advances in recent years, in 2022 the median age of death for those with CF was just 33. Wow—think about that.

The Cystic Fibrosis Trust has called for greater financial support for people with cystic fibrosis for a number of years. In 2023, a University of Bristol study reported that a typical family with cystic fibrosis loses £6,800 a year due to the extra costs of living with that condition. The CF Trust has multiple requests, including for the Government to explore additional innovative market-incentive options to encourage the industry and others to fund research and trials for new antibiotics because of current antibiotic resistance.

I believe we have seen a good and positive contribution to research and development, but we are probably at a cusp where a bit more investment and help would get us over the line. We need to prioritise diagnostics for antimicrobial-resistant infections to prevent further lung damage. The Trust's final request is to implement an early warning alert system on pollution for people with respiratory conditions.

I am looking forward to hearing what others have to say. The fact of the matter is that we have an opportunity this time because we have a Government who are spending £22 billion on the NHS. That is a massive amount of money. Every person in this great United Kingdom recognises what that means. It is the time to get it right. The Secretary of State has indicated that he is of that mind, and I know the Minister is also of that mind, so we have an opportunity to make effective change to the lives of people throughout this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Some of the £22 billion will come to us in Northern Ireland through the Barnett consequential, which is good news as well. It means that everybody gains across this great nation.

I believe now is the time to act. We in the APPG want to do all in our power to inform, support and guide the Minister and her Department in effecting change and improving quality of life for those with respiratory health issues.

1.57 pm

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I start by joining the tributes to His Majesty the King on behalf of my constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme as he marks his birthday today. It is excellent to see my

hon. Friend the Minister in her position. I think it is the first time I have had a chance to speak when she has been on the Front Bench. It is very good to see her. I am also pleased to see that the shadow Minister's brace has gone—evidence of the wonder of our national health service.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on leading it and on his opening remarks. He clearly enjoyed the lack of time limit, and probably the typo in the Order Paper that said that the debate would last for three hours. I thank him for his contribution. I should declare an interest: my wife is a deputy sister in an intensive care unit. I remain in full admiration of her and all her colleagues who work in our national health service on a daily basis.

My constituency is in the middle of our country, and air quality is one of the most important issues experienced by my constituents and one of the most frequently raised with me. It was with that in mind that I was delighted to host the Asthma and Lung UK reception in Parliament this Tuesday, where it launched its new report, "A Mission for Lung Health". I encourage all colleagues present, all Members across the House and all those watching at home to read that report.

Air quality and respiratory health are some of the most important issues experienced by my constituents. The hon. Member for Strangford highlighted the fact that respiratory conditions are the third biggest killer in the United Kingdom, and one in five of us will be diagnosed with a lung condition in our lifetime. Colleagues will have heard me talk about the disgraceful Walleys Quarry landfill site in my constituency. For far too long, the operators have got away with doing whatever they want and leaving our town smothered by the most horrendous levels of hydrogen sulphide emitting from the site.

The levels of hydrogen sulphide have had an undeniable impact on the respiratory health of my constituents. I came down to London on Monday and will be heading back to my constituency shortly. I have had many reports from constituents back home that the levels have been horrendous this week. For us in Newcastle-under-Lyme, the fight for clean air is personal and it is constant. As I have the opportunity of the Floor, I make it clear again and reiterate to the Environment Agency, if it is listening: we need it to issue a closure notice with immediate effect to Walleys Quarry Ltd. We need to cap the site and restore it safely and swiftly.

Chris Bloore *rose*—

Adam Jogee: I will happily give way to my hon. Friend from the west midlands.

Chris Bloore: Yes, the west midlands posse is here. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work to draw attention to the disgraceful scenes at Walleys Quarry. We are having a conversation about the health of the nation, in particular air quality and the impact on respiratory health, and there is no doubt in my mind that the years of lack of action on that site have had an impact on people's health. That cannot be allowed to continue.

Adam Jogee: We are on the way to getting my constituents the justice they deserve. I thank my hon. Friend for his support for our efforts, which have been led by many of my brilliant constituents, Dr Mick Salt, Lee Bernadette

Walford, Simmo Burgess, Sheelagh Casey-Hulme and many others, who have been fighting hard. I could list many people. They did not all necessarily vote for me, but they have played an important role in helping to clean our air and save lives.

In recent weeks, there has been a pretty furious rush on behalf of the borough council and an increase in demands placed on the new Government. That is all well and good, but as far as I can see, little representation seems to have been made by the borough council to the previous Government, or indeed to Staffordshire county council. The only theme among all three of those institutions is that they are led by politicians of the same party. My message to my constituents is that change has come, and I am determined to ensure that that change delivers.

I hope that, after the profit-over-people approach of the operators at Walleys Quarry, we do not see that politics over people has prevented the site being closed and the respiratory health of my constituents being protected and enhanced. I will be grateful for an update from the Minister on what cross-departmental work has taken place in Government on such issues.

Access to diagnostic testing for respiratory conditions is in dire need of reform, and the example and experiences of my constituents prove that well. Access to spirometry testing for lung conditions, in particular since the covid-19 pandemic, has been a slow and painful process for too many people across the country. It is estimated that in our United Kingdom, more than 600,000 people live with undiagnosed COPD; the hon. Member for Strangford touched on that.

Even when restrictive respiratory conditions are suspected or diagnosed, people are waiting far too long for care. The latest NHS data shows that in August almost 5,000 people in Staffordshire—4,963, to be exact—were waiting beyond the national target of 18 weeks to be seen by a respiratory doctor. That is a little more than 50% of all patients referred for treatment. Although that is higher than the national average, it is sadly not an uncommon figure. It needs to change.

When patients are diagnosed with a respiratory condition, the quality of care they receive often does not meet the standards set by NICE. Asthma and Lung UK, to which I pay tribute for all its work, has found that 70% of those living with asthma are not receiving all three aspects of basic care, and that the care received by more than 90% of those with COPD does not meet the five fundamentals required by NICE.

People living with undiagnosed and poorly managed lung conditions are more susceptible to environmental factors such as air pollution, wintry weather and poor-quality housing, all of which, sadly, are applicable to the communities and people who live in the areas surrounding Walleys Quarry in Newcastle-under-Lyme. I would be grateful if the Minister took some time today—I am happy to talk at another time, too—to discuss strengthening the powers and scope of the UK Health Security Agency, because although it has an important role to play, most of that role is currently advisory.

As colleagues have highlighted—the hon. Member for Strangford certainly did—lung conditions are more strongly associated with deprivation than any other major health condition. Sadly, the result of these combined factors is clear and, as the hon. Member noted, respiratory conditions are the largest driver of A&E admissions

each winter. Thousands of people living with undiagnosed and poorly managed respiratory conditions end up in A&E, adding even more strain to a national health service that is already under strain.

Last year, across the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent integrated care board, 3,765 people were admitted to hospital in an emergency due to a lung condition. Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care reiterated this new Labour Government's ambition to reform our national health service, but it is clear that that will not be achieved without prioritising respiratory health and care. That is entirely in line with the shifting focuses: from treatment to prevention, which has my full support; and from hospital to community care, where most respiratory care happens anyway. The Department should introduce a recovery fund of over £40 million over two years to increase the availability of testing. I know that is a big ask and I understand the financial pressures, but it would result in savings of £80 million for the national health service in reduced exacerbations, as well as a reduction of 85,474 hospital bed days.

Lastly, I want to touch on the link between waste crime and respiratory health. This morning, I received an email from Councillor Robert Bettley-Smith, the chair of Betley parish council in Newcastle-under-Lyme. Although he is in a different party from mine, I appreciate the spirit in which he works with me as we seek to serve the people who elected us. Councillor Bettley-Smith noted the continuing activity on the land at Doddlespool Hall farm in my constituency. I will not go into all the detail, but the link between waste crime and the disposal of waste generally has a huge impact on respiratory health. Councillor Bettley-Smith noted that, apart from the waste issue, there appears to be evidence, based on smoke and smell, that tyres or similar materials are being burned, and have been burned in the last week or so. The failures to regulate the waste sector under the previous Government must be put right by this new one, and I look forward to working with Ministers across Government to do exactly that.

There is a financial issue here, an environmental one and of course a health one too. I urge the excellent Minister to ensure that respiratory health is prioritised in the forthcoming 10-year plan for our beloved national health service and, importantly, in the upcoming review of the long-term workforce plan. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford for introducing this debate, and I look forward to working with him, with the Minister and with colleagues across the House on these issues in the months and years ahead.

2.6 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate. We spent many years working on these issues together, when I was in opposition.

Jim Shannon: I am still here in opposition, but the hon. Lady is now over there on the Government Benches.

Liz Twist: We worked together as part of the APPG for respiratory health. I pay tribute to the work of that APPG's members, as well as to the clinicians and patient organisations involved, including Asthma and Lung UK and Action for Pulmonary Fibrosis.

[Liz Twist]

Respiratory illnesses have a disproportionate impact on the most deprived communities. In my constituency of Blaydon and Consett, the rates of conditions such as COPD are particularly elevated, and I have seen at first hand in my surgeries over the years how debilitating they can be; they can affect every part of a person's life, from their mobility to their mental health, and tackling them is key to tackling health inequalities. Deprivation is linked not only to heightened rates of respiratory illness, but to faster rates of progression and poorer outcomes. That is true for terminal diagnoses such as pulmonary fibrosis, which has outcomes similar to common cancers, as well as for more common conditions such as asthma, which has seen a 25% increase in deaths over the past 10 years.

We know that the biggest driver of preventable lung disease is smoking, which is responsible for half of the difference in life expectancy between our richest and poorest communities. I am pleased that this Government are taking the decisive action that is needed to protect future generations through legislation, and I am particularly proud of the work that has been done over a number of years by Fresh, which sees public health and ICBs working together to tackle this issue.

Access to timely diagnoses and appropriate clinical pathways is vital for ensuring that people get the best possible treatment, but such access varies between conditions and areas of the UK. Of about 1.7 million people living with COPD in the UK, 600,000 are undiagnosed. Meanwhile, one person in every three has never heard of pulmonary fibrosis, which can lead to people receiving incorrect diagnoses, such as asthma. Incorrect diagnoses of severe asthma are common among children with the genetic condition primary ciliary dyskinesia. It is not a mild condition. In fact, children with PCD—I am not going to try to say it again—have a worse lung function than children with cystic fibrosis. It is vital that we do what we can to raise awareness of these conditions, including the rare condition of PCD, and their impact, whether they are primarily genetic in nature or driven by preventable causes.

We know that our NHS is in a really difficult place, following 14 years of Conservative mismanagement. We lost 14 years in which we could have made progress to improve the lives of people living with these conditions, but instead, they were left extremely vulnerable to the pandemic, following a decade of under-investment and disastrous top-down reorganisation by the previous Government. That is not the fault of our NHS staff, who are working hard to provide services in very difficult situations—I want to be clear about that—but the state of our health service at present was laid bare in the Darzi report just a few weeks ago. Among many other things, the report specifically notes the poor outcomes for respiratory conditions in people with learning disabilities, as well as the link between the rise in these conditions and the growing levels of damp often found in the private rented sector.

We have a long road to travel to fix the problems we have inherited, but I am proud to serve under a Government who are committed to huge investment in our NHS, and who have already made key steps towards a prevention agenda. Better public health and community care will be really important for tackling respiratory conditions and the shocking health inequalities that follow from

them. I know that the Government have a sharp focus on preventive measures, such as those mentioned by the hon. Member for Strangford, and will look at how we can best improve our access to diagnostics and treatments, including biologics, for respiratory health.

2.12 pm

Michelle Welsh (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing forward this important issue. Lung diseases are sadly prevalent in my constituency of Sherwood Forest. Diagnosis is often slow and prognosis is often devastating. Health inequalities in my constituency are stark, with people in the south of Nottinghamshire living an average seven and a half years longer than those living in the north of my constituency. Significant work across Nottinghamshire is being done regarding the diagnosis of lung cancer, and rightly so, but there are serious gaps in pathways for those suffering from lung diseases such as pulmonary fibrosis.

Pulmonary fibrosis is a devastating disease, and its impact is felt acutely by those affected. I know at first hand that this relentless and often rapidly progressing condition drastically changes the lives of the people affected and their loved ones. They face a daily struggle of breathlessness, constant fatigue and the immense mental toll of facing a terminal illness with very limited treatment options. Simple tasks such as walking across a room become an enormous challenge.

Yet pulmonary fibrosis lacks a focus that it desperately needs. Many people receive their diagnosis far too late, partly because the symptoms are often mistaken for less severe respiratory issues, and long waits for access to specialist care and life-extending treatment are very common. The disparities in access to these life-enhancing resources are unacceptable and must be addressed. Health inequalities play a significant role in accessing pulmonary fibrosis care, with those coming from a socially deprived background and living further from one of the few specialist centres likely to die sooner. I welcome the Secretary of State's call for more specialist care to be available closer to home, as the current situation is particularly problematic for pulmonary fibrosis.

I welcome the work of the national charity Action for Pulmonary Fibrosis in bringing together the community to implement a new pathway to improve many of the issues, and I hope the NHS will continue to focus on the implementation of that work. We have the opportunity to redesign services in a way that better aligns with local population needs and therefore enhances patient outcomes. I place on the record my thanks to those in the Nottingham University Hospitals NHS trust who work in respiratory care, particularly the lung nursing team, the healthcare assistants and Dr Saini, who are working endlessly to improve both diagnosis and prognosis. I know that at first hand, as sadly my father suffers from this cruel disease, and I have subsequently met many other sufferers and their carers.

People with idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis are often misunderstood, as it has no known identified cause. They often feel lost and always feel ignored. The work to improve healthcare systems for pulmonary fibrosis requires collective effort, and I hope that today's debate will pave the way for significant strides forward in how we address this heartbreaking disease so that those suffering are heard and understood.

2.16 pm

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for all his work on the APPG for respiratory health. As has been said, it is a hugely important issue, given the sheer number of people affected and killed every year and the huge amount of resources taken from the NHS.

It was good to hear everyone talk about a holistic approach, because this issue is not purely about NHS services. Most people have discussed the importance of air quality and pollution, and the hon. Member for Blaydon and Consett (Liz Twist) acknowledged that people living in poverty are more likely to suffer. I think they are five times more likely to die from COPD and about three times more likely to die from asthma. There are a whole variety of reasons for that, one being air pollution. In the village of Twyford near Winchester, one of our fantastic Lib Dem councillors has been campaigning for years to improve air quality and reduce pollution due to traffic. She is a former doctor, and one of her main motivations is to try to improve outcomes for asthma and children's respiratory health.

The Minister and I were in this Chamber about a week ago to discuss housing. It was acknowledged that the UK has the oldest housing stock in Europe, with a lot of it have been built before world war two. Again, the link between people living in poverty and living in substandard housing is very strong. I am probably not the only Member who receives correspondence from individuals in private housing association accommodation who struggle to get a response from organisations when they encounter problems such as mould.

Living in substandard housing is bad not only for physical health, but for the environment and carbon dioxide emissions. Last week, we discussed a huge programme to try to improve the housing of people living in poverty, because it is good for the environment and for people's health. We should remember that the NHS spends about £1.5 billion a year dealing directly with issues, such as damp and cold, that have arisen from people living in poor and substandard housing, so the comorbidities are huge.

I am mindful talking about the clinical treatment of respiratory diseases when the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), is actually a doctor and I am a rudimentary veterinary surgeon, but respiratory disease is a common disease that we treat in horses. By improving the surroundings they are in—by getting rid of dust and improving ventilation—we can get the huge majority of them off medication entirely. It is the same with groups of cattle, which are housed over the winter. Respiratory diseases have a huge impact on farmers' productivity, but through a combination of improving accommodation, improving ventilation and vaccination, we can get fewer illnesses and better productivity. That would be more cost-effective for the farmer and we would use fewer antibiotics.

It is exactly the same with public health. Treating people who have got sick because they live in substandard conditions is an endless task, but getting to the root cause of the problem will have huge knock-on effects throughout society.

Vaccines in human and veterinary medicine are always the most cost-effective health intervention. They are better for patients and the taxpayer and, importantly, they help us to avoid using antibiotics unnecessarily.

The World Health Organisation has noted that antimicrobial resistance is one of the biggest health challenges facing the world right now. Interestingly, vaccine hesitancy is another, so we should monitor levels of vaccination uptake, because the tripledemic, as people call it, of flu, covid and respiratory syncytial virus affects people all year round, but especially in the winter.

Slightly concerningly, it seems that 280,000 fewer NHS staff have been vaccinated this year compared with 2019, even though there are now slightly more frontline staff. Will the Minister explore why that is the case? Is it due to concerns about the vaccination or a lack of access to it? For example, I want to get vaccinated, but I just have not had the time yet this year, and that could be the problem for many people.

Vaccinating pregnant women against RSV is a hugely important intervention that helps to prevent babies under six months old from getting really sick. Most people just get a cold from RSV, but tens of thousands of babies every year are admitted to hospital with it, and it can be hugely damaging in the long run.

I have touched on holistic approaches to respiratory disease, but it is worth looking at other health conditions. The hon. Member for Strangford mentioned the work on smoking cessation, which is hugely important, but it is also worth noting the work on obesity. If a person is obese, any underlying respiratory issues are much more difficult to manage and treat, and the symptoms can often be exacerbated. We need to focus on public health interventions such as improving the quality of our food, including free school meals. I hope that, given the financial constraints the NHS is currently working under, we do not view public health as a cost to be cut, because in the long run we desperately need to invest in it to stop people getting sick and ending up in hospital.

We will not prevent every disease, no matter how hard we try. People will still get sick for a whole variety of reasons, including with COPD, asthma and lung cancer, and they will need long-term management. In our manifesto, we called for people with long-term conditions to be able to see a named GP so that they get continuity of care from someone who is very familiar with their case. Seeing someone different every time causes patients a lot of stress and sometimes results in miscommunication.

We discussed air pollution earlier. During the general election, we called for a new clean air Act, based on World Health Organisation recommendations and ideally enforced by a clean air agency. Will the Minister look seriously at that proposal, and consider other suggestions about working hard on local pollution levels, working to improve vaccination rates and housing standards, and working to ensure that anyone diagnosed with any type of cancer, but particularly lung cancer, sees a consultant within 62 days of being referred?

Adam Jogee: I omitted to put on the record earlier what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell.

Before my election to this House, I spent five years working with my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones), who shadowed the Minister responsible for air quality, so I spent a lot of time working on these issues, particularly in respect of the World Health Organisation guidelines. Will the hon.

[Adam Jogee]

Gentleman find the time for a cup of tea with me, so that we can see what we can do together to make the progress we all want to see?

Dr Chambers: Yes, I will. I live off tea—it is the only way I get through the day—and I have a particular interest in air quality, so it could be a really enjoyable meeting. As this debate is not going on for as long as the hon. Member for Strangford would like, he could come and speak with us as well.

As I was saying, a clean air Act and a named doctor are among our proposals. We are heading into winter, which NHS staff must dread: it is always busier than other periods, and a whole load of respiratory issues add to the winter pressures on the NHS. I thank and pay tribute to all the NHS workers who are heading into this very difficult time. We must do whatever we can to support them, whether that is helping them to get their vaccinations or helping them in any other way.

2.26 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. This is my first day in my new role; it seems appropriate to take over this brief and speak in a debate on respiratory illness, because dealing with respiratory illness was my first ward job as a junior doctor. I worked for four months in accident and emergency department in the west midlands, and then my first ward job was dealing with respiratory conditions in Solihull hospital, so I have seen up front just how important respiratory medicine is.

I put on the record my thanks to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate. He may often get called last in the main Chamber, but he clearly has a trick for successfully securing debates. I look forward to perhaps having a cup of tea with him to learn how he is so successful.

It is both a blessing and a curse to hear the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) make the same argument that his predecessor made about the quality of air in his constituency. I gather that it is a tip that causes a huge amount of problems there, and I hope he has success in getting the issue sorted. I also hope he takes some comfort from the fact that the previous Government passed the Environment Act 2021 to put in place legal limits to try to improve air quality and, of course, offered air-quality grants.

There is clearly an interest in respiratory conditions in both the east and west midlands, given the contribution from the hon. Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore), who is no longer in his place. Having worked over in the west midlands, I have now transferred to the clearly better east midlands.

Adam Jogee: I gently push back on the narrative that the previous Government made the sort of progress in tackling the issues at Walleys Quarry that the shadow Minister just implied. My constituents continue, on a daily basis, to deal with the worst effects of the hydrogen sulphide levels that the site emits. Hydrogen sulphide is a heavy gas and there are schools around the area. The impact on our children and the respiratory health of young lungs is massively underrated and fails to be part

of the conversation. I invite the shadow Minister to come to Walleys Quarry and to Newcastle-under-Lyme to smell the situation for himself.

Dr Evans: I am grateful for that offer, and if there is a cup of tea involved that may well be a consideration too. Perhaps we could all go there as a group on a cross-party trip.

Adam Jogee: There has been a lot of sobriety in this debate so, rather than having a cup of tea, I will take the shadow Minister to the Waggon and Horses pub in Newcastle-under-Lyme for a slightly colder refreshment.

Dr Evans: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that offer.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaydon and Consett (Liz Twist) on her work in the APPG. She was of course right to highlight smoking as a big problem, and health inequalities are also important. We also know that people experiencing health inequalities generally struggle to access healthcare, let alone healthcare for respiratory conditions—we have not even discussed the equipment and expertise needed to deal with such conditions.

The hon. Member for Sherwood Forest (Michelle Welsh) spoke about pulmonary fibrosis, a really important condition that is not given the precedence it deserves given how debilitating it is for patients who suffer with it. I pay special tribute to her for raising that issue so powerfully and so emotionally. She is a true champion for doing something about a condition that is not thought about nearly enough.

The hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) is absolutely right about holistic approaches. They are outside the remit of this debate, but housing, environment and smoking are of course all big factors. We have not even talked about comorbidities yet. We know that people over the age of 60 are usually on several medications and may have heart problems or musculoskeletal problems as well. That will have a really big impact.

With regard to the hon. Member being a vet, I think I am right in thinking that he is still allowed to practise on humans, while I certainly am not allowed to practise on pets. That is not something for a debate today, but I think it is noteworthy; if there is a problem you should rush to him too, Mr Rosindell. What he said about antimicrobial resistance is really interwoven into everything, because there is a danger of over-prescriptions for chest infections that turn out to be viruses. That is a really problematic issue that is growing, and it is the next probable pandemic, with no easy solution. He is right to highlight that.

I thank the members of the APPG for all the work they do, led by the hon. Member for Strangford. It is really important to be able to get a debate and raise these issues, and to have the infrastructure behind the members to support the team in dealing with and producing updates.

I myself have a personal history with respiratory medicine, having ended up on the intensive care unit with bilateral pneumonia after an appendicectomy in my late 20s. It has left me, at previous times, at a brittle asthma clinic. There were many attempts to diagnose what was going on, but nothing was ever found. I had to be treated with repeated steroids and felt, full on, what it is like to suddenly not be able to breathe, not be able to exercise and have that ability taken away.

When they are listening to this debate, the key thing for the public to realise is just how important our breathing really is. A breathing condition is so seminal to everything we do. There is a reason why in an emergency it is ABCDE, or airway, breathing, circulation, disability, exposure: because breathing is quite literally life. Many people have experienced having that taken away a little bit by getting covid; that has at least made people aware of just how bad viral illnesses can be.

Turning to some of the other conditions that we have not talked about—I feel like I am back in one of my medical exams in the fifth year—we have heard about asthma and COPD, but we have not talked about pulmonary embolisms, pneumoconiosis or TB. We did hear about cystic fibrosis, but we have not heard about mesothelioma or sarcoidosis. Pneumonia is a really important one to talk about too, as is lung cancer, and there are probably some that I have missed.

Respiratory conditions are really important: they make up the third place for all deaths, so they need that attention. I was therefore pleased to see the last Government come forward with the community diagnostic centres—170 community diagnostic centres going up across the country to get better access to MRI scans, CT scans or blood tests. Those will be really important, and I was lucky to have a £24 million investment for a CDC in Hinckley, which will have MRI and CT scanners, and is being built as we speak. That will be transformative for my community when they are caught between two big centres towards Nuneaton and Leicester. I hope those measures will mean that respiratory conditions play an important part in the hospital rebuild programme and the current review, and that we will ensure we have the apparatus and equipment to support them.

Turning to the nitty-gritty of the debate, I entirely agree with the idea of prevention. The Conservatives brought forward measures to deal with smoking. I hope that as the Government step forward with further ideas of how to tackle smoking and push for a smoke-free generation, we will be looking at that very closely.

The hon. Member for Strangford really hit on a point about data. Health policy must be driven by decent data, and the APPG's work highlights how respiratory conditions tend to fall behind in that. I have questions for the Minister about what work is being done now only on the simple matter of how we record things, but on how we can join up that dataset. For example, in my constituency we have two boundaries; we are caught between North Warwickshire and Leicestershire when getting answers to tests. An asthmatic does not have an asthma attack directly where they live—they could be on holiday. Sharing information on what has happened with treatment and investigations is really important.

That leads me on to spirometry. Spirometry is key, but where it is and how it is achieved is too sporadic, as is the skillset to deliver it. Then, of course, we have FENO—fractional exhaled nitric oxide—which can help to aid the diagnosis of asthma. That will be key, and the Opposition look forward to seeing what the new BTS guidelines, worked up with NICE, show on dealing with asthma.

I have a couple more questions for the Minister. I appreciate that this is not her brief, so I should be grateful if she passed on any questions she cannot answer for a written response. We have heard that the likes of the RSV vaccine are really important; new

vaccines are coming out to tackle this huge problem for the elderly and the young. The vaccine was introduced for those aged between 75 and 80, but it would be interesting to see whether there is scope to grow that and see who else is responsive. I gather from work done by my Opposition colleagues that there is still some debate to be had and evidence to be gathered on what that would look like. I would appreciate it if the Minister took that point away. What steps are the Government taking to increase the uptake of flu and pneumonia vaccinations? Prevention is better than cure.

Finally, it was mentioned that the last Government looked at chronic health strategies. It appears that the new Government have decided to take a different tack with chronic conditions. I appreciate that that is their prerogative, but there is a danger that we could have a lag. The data that has been gathered, the research that has been looked at and the policies that have been structured for the past five years or so could fall by the wayside, even though we have heard how much of an emergency it is to deal with respiratory conditions. Could the Minister clarify whether interested parties will need to resubmit the work they have done, or whether the work will be a continuation within the new structure that the Government are planning? Is there any timescale on what that would look like?

Clearly the Conservative Government were unable to get the long-term health strategies in place in time before the election. Time is ticking on, and we have a winter coming up. It is really important for organisations to understand where they stand. Christmas is coming up, and I well know from my time as a GP—I should declare an interest, as my wife is a GP as well—that Christmas is the busiest time, and respiratory conditions are one of the top reasons for that. If anyone out there is listening, getting vaccinated is imperative. I advise everyone to do so.

We know that the staff of these organisations will go above and beyond when they see someone struggling for breath. They will take their time to get the right history and get medication and treatment in place. We give them our greatest thanks, from the Opposition side of the House, for all the work they have done and will do in the busy Christmas period. I am sure that that sentiment is shared by the Government.

2.37 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell, for the first time in my new role. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate on an important issue, and I thank other Members for their contributions.

As the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) said, I am covering for my hon. Friend the Member for Gorton and Denton (Andrew Gwynne). I am pleased to do so. We had an outing this morning, and I was able to talk to the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth earlier, whose first ward area was in this area as a medic. I must say that he is getting his money's worth out of the NHS at the moment—I hope he does not have to do that again.

One of my jobs as a manager some 15 years ago was with the British Thoracic Society and primary care leading physicians on COPD. It was a project about

[Karin Smyth]

living and dying with COPD and helping people to understand the disease and navigate it. I learned an awful lot about respiratory disease at that time and how people live and die with it. I commend that work.

I am shocked at some of what we have heard this afternoon and what I found in preparing for this debate about quite how poor things are, and that some basic preventive measures we were talking about 15, 16 or 17 years ago are still not in place. I am really happy to be responding this afternoon. I am not sure I will be able to satisfy everyone's requests, but I can say on behalf of the Minister for Public Health and Prevention, my hon. Friend the Member for Gorton and Denton, that he will be happy to accept the invitation to the roundtable that the hon. Member for Strangford talks about, and his expertise will be better there than mine. We are keen to pursue that conversation with the hon. Gentleman and the all-party parliamentary group.

As we have heard, one in five of us will be affected by a chronic respiratory disease at some point in our life. These conditions are, sadly, the third biggest contributor to years of life lost in England. Many people out and about using public transport will know the symptoms of poor respiratory health. They might associate a wheezing or raking cough with being indicative of a smoker, but not all ill health is about personal choice. In fact, this common symptom belies a huge range of conditions, only some of them related to smoking and each requiring different interventions. On all those conditions, we are taking forward a combination of immediate bold actions and long-term reforms.

The Government are taking radical action to create the first smoke-free generation. We are clamping down on kids getting hooked on vapes and protecting children and vulnerable people from second-hand smoke. Tobacco is a uniquely harmful product and smoking is the No. 1 preventable cause of death, disability and ill health. The statistics are stark: smoking claims the lives of about 80,000 people a year in the UK and kills up to two thirds of its long-term users. Second-hand or passive smoke is extremely harmful to health. There is no safe level of exposure to smoke: if we can smell cigarette smoke, we are inhaling it. Smoke is harmful, particularly to children, pregnant women or people with pre-existing health conditions such as asthma or heart disease, which may not be visible to the smoker.

Our Tobacco and Vapes Bill, which we introduced last week, will be the single biggest public health intervention since the last Labour Government banned smoking in indoor public spaces. The Bill's primary aim is to create a smoke-free generation by gradually ending the sale of tobacco products throughout the country and breaking the cycle of addiction and disadvantage, so that someone born after 2009 will never be able to legally buy tobacco. This landmark legislation will also enable the Government to strengthen the existing ban on smoking in public places and to reduce the harms of passive smoking in certain outdoor settings. It will ban vapes and nicotine products from being promoted and advertised, to prevent the next generation from being hooked on nicotine.

We will hear all sorts of arguments against these sorts of policies, with people saying it is the nanny state or that they are anti-growth. However, most smokers—myself included—always wish they had never started. They have

had their choice taken away by addiction induced at a young age by the tobacco industry. I remind Members present that smoking costs the economy and wider society some £21.8 billion a year through lost productivity, smoking-related lost earnings, unemployment and early death, as well as the cost to the NHS and social care of over £3 billion. Our action will save thousands of lives and protect the NHS. I pay tribute to charities such as Action on Smoking and Health and Asthma and Lung UK, which have supported our work. Through our changes we will create a healthier society and, in doing so, boost the economy.

As we have heard this afternoon, smoking is only one example of how our respiratory health is influenced by our environment. Even though it has been almost 70 years since the first Clean Air Act was passed, what we breathe remains one of the greatest risks to public health in the UK. As the chief medical officer's 2022 annual report on air pollution sets out, there is clear evidence that outdoor air pollution contributes to the initiation and development of respiratory diseases such as lung cancer. That is why the Government are committed to a preventive approach in this policy area. I assure people that we are taking a mission-led approach, working across Departments to improve air quality. We want to address the inequalities in the quality of the air that people breathe simply because of where they live.

The Department of Health and Social Care will support the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to deliver a comprehensive and ambitious clean air strategy. This will include a series of interventions to reduce emissions so that everyone's exposure to air pollution is reduced. The UK Health Security Agency, which has been talked about this afternoon, is working closely with DEFRA to review how we communicate air-quality information to ensure that members of the public, and vulnerable groups in particular, have what they need to protect themselves.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) for his work in support of his constituents with regard to Walleys Quarry. The Minister for Public Health and Prevention visited Newcastle-under-Lyme recently and will pursue those discussions with the Environment Agency.

The Government are also taking steps to reduce risks to respiratory health in people's homes—a point addressed well by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers). Living in a home with damp and mould increases the risk of respiratory illness and conditions such as asthma and COPD. It also affects symptom severity and the risk of death for individuals with existing respiratory conditions. We are therefore putting forward an initial £3.4 billion towards heat decarbonisation and household energy efficiency over the next three years, and £1.8 billion to support fuel poverty schemes. That means that over 225,000 households will receive help to reduce their energy bills by more than £200.

The hon. Members for Winchester, for Strangford and for Hinckley and Bosworth made excellent points about vaccinations. We want to encourage everyone, including ourselves—I look around the room, even at myself; I am slightly behind on my flu vaccine—to do all we can ourselves and to encourage others to take up vaccines and prevent some of the related problems.

We recognise, however, that not all ill health can be prevented, so we need to act to help those who need treatment. I assure the hon. Member for Strangford and other contributors that respiratory disease remains a clinical priority.

The NHS long-term plan under the last Government set a series of objectives for improving outcomes for people with respiratory disease through early diagnosis and increased access to treatments. As we have heard, and as I have said, it is quite shocking that that basic objective is not being achieved everywhere. Access to checks and basic preventive care needs to be much better spread across the country. That is why we say that we want to take the best of the NHS to the rest of the NHS. NHS England has 13 respiratory clinical networks across the country, which are vital in providing clinical leadership across primary and secondary care for respiratory services and supporting services in primary care, where of course most patient contact is.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood Forest (Michelle Welsh) for highlighting pulmonary fibrosis. I wish her father and her family well. She is absolutely right that early and accurate diagnosis is a priority for NHS England. Work to make improvements is under way, and that should have an impact on reducing delayed diagnoses of pulmonary fibrosis. As I understand it, access to these treatments has recently been expanded to patients with non-idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, following the publication of the NICE technology appraisal for treating progressive fibrosing lung diseases. I hope that that goes some way towards reassuring my hon. Friend, who spoke so eloquently today.

As the hon. Member for Strangford and my hon. Friends the Members for Newcastle-under-Lyme, for Blaydon and Consett (Liz Twist) and for Sherwood Forest highlighted, COPD is a major contributor to inequalities in life expectancy and in healthy life expectancy. People living in the most deprived parts of the country are five times more likely to die from COPD than those in the least deprived. I have seen that both in my previous work with those working in the NHS and since becoming the Member of Parliament for Bristol South in 2015. My constituency was home to the Wills tobacco company, a huge employer in the area over many decades. Its legacy can be seen in many different ways, but particularly in the very high rates of smoking in my constituency—up to 32% in some parts. The reduced lives lived in good health, and those shocking early deaths, are things that I see every day. The impact is still very apparent in the shocking statistics on health inequality across my home city of Bristol.

Let me assure hon. Members that this issue remains a priority for all of us in this Government. Reducing health inequalities is a key part of our mission. That requires us to work across Government, and it runs across all parts of Government. In NHS England, Core20PLUS5 is a national approach to inform action to reduce healthcare inequalities at both national and local system level. The approach provides a vehicle for targeted interventions to detect and treat the diseases that are major contributors to life expectancy as well as pressures on the NHS.

We know that there is a particular risk of condition exacerbation around the winter, leading to emergency treatment in hospital and in-patient care. That is why the focus of the Core20PLUS5 action on respiratory

health this year has been to increase vaccination uptake, including covid-19, flu and pneumovax, which can protect against serious illnesses such as pneumonia and meningitis.

NHS England is leading on the development of an approach for COPD management. This will support proactive identification and management of risk in patients in winter, to reduce demand on primary and secondary care. My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon and Consett was absolutely right to highlight the low levels of diagnosis, the number of people living with COPD and other respiratory diseases, and the impact on children that we might not even know about. The plan is to test and evaluate this approach in four sites this winter to help inform decisions on winter planning in the future.

On severe asthma and access to biologic treatment, significant work has been undertaken through the NHS England severe asthma collaborative to develop the capacity of the severe asthma centres. That important work includes streamlining patient pathways to biologic therapy and reducing variation in prescribing and patient management. Patient outcomes are now submitted to the UK severe asthma registry. That has led to improved identification of patients with potential severe asthma in primary and secondary care, resulting in referral to severe asthma centres for consideration of eligibility for biologic therapy.

Action to address avoidable deaths from asthma has not gone far enough. That is why we are working to ensure that asthma care has a higher prioritisation within systems, for example through the national bundle of care for children and young people with asthma workstream, which is intended to improve outcomes for children and young people with asthma.

Looking further forward, a central mission of the Government is to build healthcare that is fit for the future. As hon. Members have noted, our 10-year health plan will focus on the three shifts needed to deliver a modern NHS: from hospital to community, from analogue to digital and from sickness to prevention. That is a long-term challenge and those shifts will take time to deliver, so the plan will consider what immediate actions are needed to get the NHS back on its feet and bring waiting lists down, as well as the longer-term changes needed to make the health service fit for the future.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford for his commitment to respond to our engagement exercise. I encourage all organisations and individuals to contribute to the 10-year plan at change.nhs.uk. We are keen to work with the public, patients and our partners in all the organisations that support this work. We will listen and co-design the plan with them.

Disease-specific and more general long-term conditions that affect people's health are a very live issue. Given the level of comorbidities with which people currently live, it is important to look at the person as well as the diseases. We will continue to look at that as part of the development of the 10-year plan; I know that all hon. Members will take an active part in that process. The hon. Gentleman will tell me if there is anything to which I have not responded.

The hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth asked for an update on the RSV vaccine. As part of my portfolio working on urgent and emergency care, we are looking closely at a vaccine update, as well as at the

[Karin Smyth]

presentation of very young children with respiratory disease in the emergency care system; I am sure that he is aware of that issue. If there is anything else that he would like to know, I will ensure that he is written to. On spirometry and fractional exhaled nitric oxide tests, a look at the NICE guidelines is long overdue, so I hope that we see some more progress on that. If I have missed something, Members may write to the Minister for Public Health and Prevention and he will respond very promptly.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford and the APPG for raising the issue. I am genuinely very pleased to see it being raised. As a contributor to admissions and inequalities, it is a very serious disease and we need to highlight it. I thank him for the invitation to take part in a discussion with healthcare professionals on the way ahead for respiratory health. My ministerial colleagues look forward to discussing that further.

2.53 pm

Jim Shannon: I thank everyone for their incredibly helpful contributions. It is no secret that I always look for a consensual debate, because that is more positive. That is what we have had today.

We have had the opportunity to discuss many issues. With your indulgence, Mr Rosindell, I will speak to each. Since coming to this House, the hon. Member for Newcastle-upon-Lyme—

Adam Jogee: On a point of order, Mr Rosindell. My constituency is Newcastle-under-Lyme, not Newcastle-upon-Lyme as several colleagues have called it.

Andrew Rosindell (in the Chair): That will be on the record.

Jim Shannon: I will never get it wrong again. I thank the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) for his contribution. Air quality has been a massive issue for him since he came to this House; he has reiterated that over and over again. I am hopeful that he will have the success for which he hopes. He referred to deprivation and low incomes as factors. Priority for respiratory health is needed, as the Minister confirmed. The hon. Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) rightly referred to the need for regular asthma check-ups.

It is always a pleasure to work alongside the hon. Member for Blaydon and Consett (Liz Twist). She and I have talked about this issue over the past five or six years. It was a pleasure to hear her contribution, which included first-hand evidence from her surgery. I agree that we need improved access to diagnostics and medical help.

I thank the hon. Member for Sherwood Forest (Michelle Welsh) for her personal contribution; nothing tells a story better than a personal contribution. As the Minister says, we hope that her family members are able to deal with their issues in a positive fashion, and hopefully the medical care will be there as well. The hon. Lady referred to how the disease drastically changes lives, with some people being unable to walk. She also focused on charity work, which is really important.

The hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) referred to air pollution, as his party has done for many years. He underlined the problems and the impact on children, and he referred to our old housing stock. These are critical issues. We sometimes forget about farmer's lung, but those who live in the countryside do not, because it is a big issue. He also referred to RSV, the impact on pregnant women and the importance of vaccination.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), reminded us that his first job related to this issue. That has allowed him to make an incredible input into the debate: we thank him for everything that he has put forward. It is fair to say that the last Government had a plan, but a more holistic approach is needed. I thank him for his role on the APPG. Prevention is absolutely the way to go, and data is important. He also mentioned spirometry.

The Minister responded in excellent fashion. I wrote down all the things she said. I thank her for committing to a meeting. I am sure that her colleague the hon. Member for Gorton and Denton (Andrew Gwynne) will be watching the debate and will respond. She referred to her former job and vocation, in which she had dealings with COPD directly. I am also grateful for the roundtable commitment. The Government have committed to a smoke-free society, on which a Bill is pending; that will be important in preventing lung cancer, especially for children. She also referred to damp in homes, an incredibly important issue that comes up all the time in the main Chamber.

The Minister responded very positively, if I may say so, to all the issues on which we required answers, including vaccinations, energy efficiency and fuel poverty. The respiratory network across the nation deals with COPD and major contributors to respiratory health issues, and the Government are committed to it. Respiratory health and biologics are priorities for the Government. It is not often that we have a debate with so much input from everyone, and yet we have a Minister who answers all the questions.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered respiratory health.

2.58 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 14 November 2024

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

New Coal Extraction Licences: Prohibition

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): First, I would like to give thanks to the hundreds of thousands of workers across the United Kingdom who have dedicated themselves to the coal extraction industry that helped power the industrial revolution for the sacrifices they have made.

At the end of September 2024, Great Britain's last coal fired electricity power plant, Ratcliffe-on-Soar, closed after over 50 years in service. This marks the right time to take further steps to move away from coal by restricting its future supply.

It is our intention to change coal extraction policy through primary legislation to restrict future licensing of all new coal mines. We anticipate this will involve measures to amend the Coal Industry Act 1994 to prevent the prospective granting of licences. We will examine what limited exceptions may be required—for example, for safety or restoration purposes—and there are a small number of licensed operational coal mines that will be unaffected by the measures and can continue coal mining in accordance with their current licences and consents.

The measures we will bring forward, when timing allows, mean we will be one of the first countries in the world to ban new coal mines, allowing us to focus our efforts on revitalising our industrial heartlands, supporting the transition to new jobs in clean energy across the United Kingdom, and creating industries of the future. It marks a clear signal to industry, markets and the world that coal mining in the United Kingdom does not have a long-term future.

[HCWS215]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Diplomatic Immunity: Alleged Serious and Significant Offences 2023

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): In 2023, nine serious and significant offences allegedly committed by people entitled to diplomatic or international organisation-related immunity in the United Kingdom were drawn to the attention of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office by the parliamentary and diplomatic protection unit of the Metropolitan Police Service, or other law enforcement agencies.

We define serious offences as those which could, in certain circumstances, carry a penalty of 12 months' imprisonment or more. Also included are other significant offences, such as driving without insurance, certain types of assault and cruelty to or neglect of a child.

Around 26,500 people are entitled to diplomatic or international organisation-related immunity in the UK and the vast majority of diplomats and dependants abide by UK law. The number of alleged serious offences committed by members of the diplomatic community in the UK is proportionately low.

Under the Vienna convention on diplomatic relations 1961 and related legislation, we expect those entitled to immunity to obey the law. The FCDO does not tolerate foreign diplomats or dependants breaking the law.

We take all allegations of illegal activity seriously. When the police or other law enforcement agencies bring instances of alleged criminal conduct to our attention, we ask the relevant foreign Government or international organisation to waive immunity, where appropriate, to facilitate further investigation. For the most serious offences, and when a relevant waiver has not been granted, we request the immediate withdrawal of the diplomat or dependant.

Listed below are alleged serious and significant offences reported to the FCDO by UK law enforcement agencies in 2023.

Possession/distribution of indecent images of children

Iraq 1

Driving without insurance

Fiji 1

Pakistan 1

Assault

Ghana 1

Libya 1

Mongolia 1

Sexual Assault

Libya 1

Indecent Exposure

Portugal 1

Cruelty to or Neglect of a Child

Singapore 1

Figures for previous years are available in the written statement made to the House by then Under-Secretary of State for Americas and Caribbean on 14 September 2023 (HCWS1028), which can be found at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2023-09-14/hcws1028>

[HCWS1028]

Diplomatic Missions and International Organisations: Debts 2023-24

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office officials have regular contact with diplomatic missions and international organisations in the UK about outstanding national non-domestic rates payments, outstanding parking fine debt and unpaid London congestion charge debt, to press for payment of outstanding debt and fines. The protocol directorate wrote in February 2024 to all diplomatic missions and international organisations about their obligations to pay the charges, fines and taxes for which they are liable, and has since written again to those

missions with outstanding debt to give them the opportunity to either pay outstanding debts, or to appeal against specific fines and charges that they consider incorrectly recorded.

National non-domestic rates

The majority of diplomatic missions in the United Kingdom pay the national non-domestic rates due from them. Diplomatic missions and international organisations are obliged to pay only 6% of the total NNDR value of their offices. This represents payment for specific services received, such as street cleaning and street lighting.

As at 17 October 2024, the total amount of outstanding NNDR payments arising from invoices issued to 31 December 2023 is £4,142,255. Representations in 2024 by the protocol directorate of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to missions and organisations has led to the settlement of over £869,000 of outstanding debts owed by a number of missions and organisations. We continue to urge all those with NNDR debt to pay their dues.

Diplomatic premises of the following countries and international organisations have balances in excess of £10,000 in respect of NNDR for invoices issued up to 31 December 2023:

Diplomatic mission or international organisation	Value of outstanding beneficial portion of NNDR payments due
China	£646,183.22
Iran	£242,754.13
Sudan	£241,400.83
Libya	£209,263.27
Zimbabwe	£172,770.72
Zambia	£168,873.60
Russia	£168,615.50
Nigeria	£118,223.07
Bulgaria	£115,654.07
India	£99,385.88
Bangladesh	£97,640.51
Sri Lanka	£93,522.48
Morocco	£88,399.84
Ethiopia	£87,934.22
Sierra Leone	£79,090.60
Qatar	£77,327.54
Uganda	£74,753.26
Algeria	£58,487.81
Iraq	£57,682.73
Tunisia	£54,937.61
Eswatini	£50,325.28
South Africa	£50,298.09
Equatorial Guinea	£50,058.32
Gambia	£45,155.81
Yemen	£43,258.32
Côte d'Ivoire	£35,771.34
Cameroon	£33,062.87
Hungary	£32,600.51
Pakistan	£32,053.47
Venezuela	£30,504.96
Liberia	£24,739.40
Fiji	£23,463.65
Ghana	£23,008.64
Saudi Arabia	£22,929.93
Democratic Republic of the Congo	£22,374.42
Argentina	£21,746.47

Diplomatic mission or international organisation	Value of outstanding beneficial portion of NNDR payments due
Togo	£21,735.05
Luxembourg	£20,520.96
Tanzania	£18,285.77
Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation	£18,155.52
Malawi	£17,761.64
Haiti	£17,731.72
Oman	£17,406.76
Jamaica	£14,131.20
Paraguay	£13,484.65
Albania	£13,263.32
Iceland	£13,178.88
Republic of Guinea	£13,133.54
Germany	£12,466.26
Egypt	£11,771.64
Afghanistan	£11,414.22
Slovenia	£11,301.21
Eritrea	£11,283.53
North Korea	£11,080.28
Saint Lucia	£10,951.20
Grenada	£10,892.50
Lesotho	£10,748.40
Seychelles	£10,676.87

Parking fines

Parking fines incurred by diplomatic missions and international organisations are brought to our attention by local authorities, primarily but not exclusively in London. The FCDO considers those with privileges and immunities liable for fines issued as penalty charge notices by local authorities for vehicle parking infringements. We expect PCNs to be paid to the issuing office.

The FCDO regularly reminds missions and international organisations to pay outstanding PCNs. We wrote to all missions and international organisations in February to remind them of their obligations to pay fines for parking infringements and have written to those missions and organisations with outstanding debt, giving them the opportunity either to pay or to appeal against them if they consider that the fines had been recorded incorrectly.

As at 30 June 2024, the total value of outstanding PCNs notified to FCDO by local authorities is £1,489,618. The table below details those diplomatic missions and international organisations which have outstanding PCN fines totalling £10,000 or more:

Diplomatic mission or international organisation	Value of outstanding PCNs
Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia	£196,630.00
Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan	£138,850.00
High Commission for the Federal Republic of Nigeria	£78,300.00
Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco	£71,060.00
Embassy of the Republic of Iraq	£70,380.00
Uganda High Commission	£55,680.00
Embassy of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire	£40,200.00
Embassy of the Republic of South Sudan	£33,435.00

Diplomatic mission or international organisation	Value of outstanding PCNs
Embassy of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia	£33,260.00
High Commission for the Republic of Zambia	£29,525.00
Embassy of Romania	£28,620.00
Embassy of the Sultanate of Oman	£28,160.00
Embassy of the United Arab Emirates	£27,215.00
Embassy of the Republic of the Sudan	£25,025.00
High Commission for the Islamic Republic of Pakistan	£24,375.00
High Commission of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka	£23,280.00
Embassy of Panama	£21,920.00
High Commission of the Republic of Ghana	£21,525.00
Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran	£19,869.00
Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany	£19,730.00
Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan	£17,975.00
Embassy of the State of Qatar	£17,855.00
Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan	£17,795.00
High Commission of the United Republic of Tanzania	£15,435.00
Embassy of Georgia	£15,135.00
Embassy of the People's Republic of China	£14,923.00
Malaysian High Commission	£14,309.00
High Commission for the Republic of India	£13,964.00
Embassy of Hungary	£11,040.00
High Commission for the Republic of Cameroon	£10,925.00
Embassy of the Republic of Liberia	£10,875.00
Embassy of Libya	£10,095.00

London congestion charge

The value of unpaid congestion charge debt incurred by diplomatic missions and international organisations in London since its introduction in February 2003 until 30 September 2024 as advised by Transport for London was £152,436,135. TfL publishes details of diplomatic missions and international organisations with outstanding fines at <https://tfl.gov.uk/corporate/publications-and-reports/congestion-charge>

We consider that there are no legal grounds to exempt diplomatic missions and international organisations from the London congestion charge, which is comparable to a parking fee or toll charge they are required to pay. FCDO officials write to diplomatic missions and international organisations with large congestion charge debts annually, to encourage payment.

The table below shows those diplomatic missions and international organisations with outstanding fines of £100,000 or more. FCDO officials write to diplomatic missions and international organisations with large congestion charge debts annually, to encourage payment.

TfL will also be approaching all diplomatic missions and international organisations with outstanding congestion charge debt.

Diplomatic mission or international organisation	Amount owed
US Embassy	£15,160,275
Embassy of Japan	£10,422,558
Embassy of the People's Republic of China	£9,303,180
High Commission of the Republic of India	£9,141,875
High Commission for the Federal Republic of Nigeria	£8,812,745
Embassy of the Russian Federation	£6,061,815
Embassy of the Republic of Poland	£5,630,650
High Commission of the Republic of Ghana	£5,311,245
Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan	£5,038,765
Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany	£4,714,830
Embassy of the Republic of the Sudan	£4,077,860
Kenya High Commission	£3,459,030
High Commission for the Islamic Republic of Pakistan	£3,423,720
Embassy of the Republic of Korea	£2,810,740
Embassy of the Republic of Cuba	£2,756,400
Embassy of France	£2,617,800
Embassy of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria	£2,428,290
High Commission of the United Republic of Tanzania	£2,394,920
Embassy of Spain	£2,277,960
High Commission of the Republic of South Africa	£2,065,460
Sierra Leone High Commission	£2,033,835
Embassy of Romania	£1,925,050
Embassy of the Republic of Türkiye	£1,837,390
Embassy of Greece	£1,739,312
Embassy of Ukraine	£1,729,090
High Commission of the Republic of Cyprus	£1,536,330
Embassy of Hungary	£1,444,620
High Commission for the Republic of Zambia	£1,194,200
Embassy of the Republic of Yemen	£1,103,700
Botswana High Commission	£1,066,890
Embassy of the Republic of Bulgaria	£967,700
Uganda High Commission	£920,720
High Commission for the Republic of Mozambique	£898,290
High Commission of the Republic of Malawi	£891,755
Embassy of the Republic of Zimbabwe	£865,895
Embassy of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia	£858,370
Embassy of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire	£840,810

Diplomatic mission or international organisation	Amount owed
Kingdom of Eswatini High Commission	£815,770
High Commission of the Republic of Namibia	£796,480
High Commission of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka	£787,920
High Commission for the Republic of Cameroon	£775,680
Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco	£764,290
Malta High Commission	£755,405
Embassy of the Republic of Belarus	£737,785
Embassy of Belgium	£715,830
Mauritius High Commission	£710,855
Embassy of Slovakia	£704,700
Embassy of the Republic of Lithuania	£680,295
Embassy of Austria	£655,540
Embassy of the Republic of Liberia	£642,630
Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan	£624,830
High Commission of the Kingdom of Lesotho	£569,020
Embassy of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea	£566,690
Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam	£546,540
Embassy of the Republic of Iraq	£527,310
Embassy of the Republic of Guinea	£524,740
Jamaican High Commission	£500,920
Embassy of Tunisia	£493,840
Embassy of the Czech Republic	£489,730
Embassy of the Republic of South Sudan	£460,920
Embassy of the Democratic Republic of the Congo	£444,420
Embassy of the Republic of Slovenia	£438,723
Royal Danish Embassy	£419,675
Embassy of the Republic of Latvia	£369,770
High Commission for Antigua and Barbuda	£356,595
Embassy of Portugal	£350,620
Embassy of Luxembourg	£343,055
Embassy of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan	£296,870
Belize High Commission	£282,030
Embassy of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea	£276,320
High Commission of the Republic of Maldives	£252,260
Embassy of the Arab Republic of Egypt	£243,820
Embassy of Estonia	£236,060
Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia	£222,080
Embassy of the Republic of the Philippines	£208,390
High Commission for Guyana	£203,680
Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania	£200,780

Diplomatic mission or international organisation	Amount owed
Embassy of the State of Eritrea	£194,980
The High Commission of the Republic of Seychelles	£169,935
Embassy of the Dominican Republic	£169,180
Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic	£147,957
High Commission for Saint Lucia	£141,680
Embassy of El Salvador	£132,865
Embassy of the Republic of Senegal	£132,555
Embassy of the Republic of Albania	£127,630
Embassy of the Republic of Moldova	£124,570
The Gambia High Commission	£116,980
Embassy of Bosnia and Herzegovina	£101,380

Figures for previous years are available in the written statement to the House made by the then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Americas and Caribbean on 14 September 2023 (HCWS1030), which can be found at <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2023-09-14/hcws1030>.

[HCWS218]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Director of Labour Market Enforcement: Interim Annual Strategy 2024-25

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): Alongside the Minister with responsibility for employment rights, competition and markets, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Bromborough (Justin Madders), I am today publishing the labour market enforcement annual strategy for 2024-25, submitted by the Director of Labour Market Enforcement, Margaret Beels OBE. The strategy will be available on gov.uk.

The director's role was created by the Immigration Act 2016 to bring better focus and strategic co-ordination to the enforcement of labour market legislation by the three enforcement bodies which are responsible for state enforcement of specific employment rights:

The Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate;
His Majesty's Revenue and Customs national minimum and living wage enforcement team; and
The Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority.

Under section 2 of the Act, the director is required to prepare an annual labour market enforcement strategy that assesses the scale and nature of non-compliance in the labour market, and sets priorities for future enforcement by the three enforcement bodies and the allocation of resources needed to deliver those priorities. The annual strategy, once approved, is laid before Parliament. The director is a statutory office-holder independent from Government, but accountable to the Secretary of State for Business and Trade and the Home Secretary.

In line with the obligations under the Act, Margaret Beels submitted this strategy for 2024-25 on 25 March 2024—it has since been revised and resubmitted to the new administration. This strategy continues on from the 2023-24 strategy by using the same four themes to provide an assessment of the scale and nature of non-compliance, and notes sectors where the risk level has changed. The strategy sets out the DLME's desire to achieve improved cohesion and join-up between the DLME and the three state enforcement bodies through non-legislative measures, including suggestions of where the enforcement bodies and sponsor departments should be focusing their efforts.

The Government's view is that the enforcement bodies have been funded sufficiently to deliver the activities set out in the strategy. The DLME carried out stakeholder engagement for the 2024-25 strategy with a call for evidence. In previous years, the Government published a response to the strategy setting out the approach we will take to the recommendations. Following their submission, the enforcement bodies have had an opportunity to review the recommendations, and we have sought agreement on the recommendations ahead of publication of the strategy.

As part of the Government's commitment and in line with the ambition set out in Make Work Pay, the Fair Work Agency will bring together existing state enforcement functions and incorporate a wider range of employment rights. The DLME, as do we, consider the recommendations to still be appropriate to not only co-ordinate the enforcement of labour market legislation currently, but to help pave the way for the FWA by continuing to support the close collaboration of the enforcement bodies.

I thank the DLME for her strategy and encourage her to continue to work closely with stakeholders and the enforcement bodies.

[HCWS219]

JUSTICE

Criminal Legal Aid

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Heidi Alexander): Today, I am announcing the Government's response to the criminal legal aid "Crime Lower" consultation which was launched in January of this year. "Crime Lower" covers work carried out by legal aid providers at police stations, in the magistrates courts in relation to people accused of, or charged with criminal offences, prison law and work completed by the Criminal Cases Review Commission

Criminal legal aid is a vital part of the criminal justice system. It plays an important role in upholding the constitutional right to access to justice and a fair trial, providing an equality of arms between the prosecution and defence.

In response to the criminal legal aid independent review, the Ministry of Justice allocated additional investment in its 2024-25 budget to solicitors undertaking criminal legal aid work in police stations and the youth court. The "Crime Lower" consultation sought views on how best to distribute the additional £21.1 million funding for those schemes.

The Government are committed to supporting the sustainability of the criminal legal aid system and will invest an additional £2.9 million in the police station

schemes, taking the total annual investment in response to the crime lower consultation to £24 million.

£18.5 million per annum will go into the police station fee schemes to begin the process of harmonising the different fees across different police stations.

£5.1 million per annum will be spent on a separate youth court fee scheme with enhanced fees for the most serious offences.

We are also introducing police station travel remuneration in relation to police station schemes with fewer than two providers, and the Isle of Wight. This reflects concerns around capacity challenges for specific schemes and is designed to incentivise providers from neighbouring schemes to pick up cases in these areas of concern. This will cost around £0.4 million per annum.

The consultation response has been published on gov.uk and a copy has been placed in the Library of the House.

[HCWS216]

PRIME MINISTER

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe: UK Delegation

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): The United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is as follows:

Full representatives

The right hon. the Lord Touhig (Leader of the UK delegation and Vice-Chair)

Dan Aldridge MP

Sir Christopher Chope MP

Cat Eccles MP

Linsey Farnsworth MP

Stephen Gethins MP

Lord German

Lord Griffiths of Burry Port

Leigh Ingham MP

Alicia Kearns MP

The right hon. the Lord Keen of Elie KC

James MacCleary MP

Perran Moon MP

Jake Richards MP

John Slinger MP

The right hon. the Baroness Taylor of Bolton

Tony Vaughan MP

Michelle Welsh MP

Substitute Members

Richard Baker MP

The right hon. the Lord Blencathra

The right hon. Dame Karen Bradley MP

Baroness Brinton

The right hon. the Baroness Chakrabarti

The right hon. the Lord Foulkes of Cumnock

Baroness Helic

Baroness Hunt of Bethnal Green

The right hon. Sir Edward Leigh MP

Kate Osamor MP

Kate Osborne MP

Manuela Perteghella MP

Mike Reader MP

Sam Rushworth MP

Elaine Stewart MP

The right hon. Valerie Vaz MP
Nadia Whittome MP
Baroness Wilcox of Newport

[HCWS220]

TRANSPORT

NATS Technical Failure: CAA Report

The Secretary of State for Transport (Louise Haigh):

The Civil Aviation Authority has today published the final report of the independent review, led by Jeff Halliwell and an expert panel, into the NATS technical IT failure of 28 August 2023. I would like to express my gratitude to the panel for its work.

In its final report, the panel has recognised that several factors contributed to the technical failure and that it is unlikely that the same unique set of circumstances would ever occur again, and that if they did, due to the actions already taken by NATS, the outcome would be different. While I am pleased that actions have been taken since the incident, it is critical that we ensure that consumers have confidence when travelling; that possible disruption is minimised; that there is resilience in the system; and that air passengers are informed of their rights should something go wrong.

The report estimates that over 700,000 passengers were impacted, with the total cost of the technical failure to industry and air passengers likely to have been between £75 million and £100 million.

The panel met with a wide range of industry stakeholders, including NATS, airlines and airports, international operators, and the Department for Transport. It has reached the conclusion that all relevant parts of the aviation sector need to work together better in the future when responding to major events such as the NATS technical failure.

The panel makes a total of 34 recommendations for future improvements for NATS (12), CAA (11), airlines/airports (6) and the Government (5) to respond to and deliver on.

The five recommendations that the Government have been asked to consider relate to improving consumer protections for aviation passengers, including giving the CAA additional powers and mandating alternative dispute resolution for all airlines operating in the UK.

The CAA will be responsible for monitoring delivery against the panel's recommendations for all parties. It is important that progress is made and that actions taken deliver better outcomes for the consumer. I have therefore asked that the CAA produces a report in six months' time to provide an update on the progress made in response to each of the 34 recommendations set out in today's publication.

Air passenger rights are a priority for my Department, and we will look to introduce reforms when we can to provide air travellers with the highest level of protection possible.

[HCWS221]

East West Rail

The Secretary of State for Transport (Louise Haigh):

East West Rail supports this Government's mission to kickstart economic growth and productivity right

across the Oxford-Cambridge region by providing easier and faster regional connectivity, opening up access to employment and skills training, and supporting new housing developments. By 2050, East West Rail is set to boost the Oxford-Cambridge regional economy by £6.7 billion every year.

The Oxford-Cambridge region is home to a number of research and development hubs across a variety of highly skilled and highly productive sectors, such as life sciences research at the Cambridge biomedical campus. East West Rail would provide these vital sites with the connectivity they need to increase their access to the talent pool and allow the region to compete better on the global stage, supporting up to 28,000 jobs in Cambridge alone.

East West Rail will also be crucial to ensuring that planned housing developments in the region are well connected, by joining newer settlements and housing to established conurbations in Cambridge, Bedford, Oxford, and Milton Keynes.

The first stage of East West Rail from Oxford to Bletchley and Milton Keynes is currently in delivery and will open in 2025. The Budget confirmed the acceleration of works on the Marston Vale line, ensuring that East West Rail services will run from Oxford to Milton Keynes and Bedford from 2030.

The next stage of the scheme is a non-statutory consultation, which will go live on 14 November 2024, and be followed by a statutory consultation, and then a development consent order application. This consultation will feature proposals on:

The new services and stations that will be provided by East West Rail for people living in the Oxford-Cambridge region; Battery/overhead electrification as the baseline traction solution for the railway;

Options for how stations and services should be provided for the Marston Vale line (Bletchley-Bedford);

Redevelopment of Bedford station to address increased service levels and improve the passenger experience;

The closure of Bicester London road level crossing and other proposals related to level crossings;

The alignment of the railway and new east coast main line interchange station at Tempsford;

A new station at Cambourne and potential alterations to other stations along the line of route, including in the Cambridge area;

Options in the Oxford area to accommodate additional services.

The Department for Transport will also be issuing safeguarding directions for East West Rail today to protect land from conflicting development. I am placing a copy of the safeguarding directions in the Libraries of both Houses.

Taking forward these next steps for the East West Rail scheme reinforces this Government's mission to kickstart economic growth and connectivity to unlock access to the skills, education, and jobs needed to deliver national growth and individual prosperity. The Department for Transport will work collaboratively with cross-Government partners, including the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government, to ensure a joined-up approach to growth and development in the region.

[HCWS222]

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 14 November 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS	885	ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS— <i>continued</i>	
Budget: Impact on Farming Communities	885	Water Sector Commission	893
Crustacean Die-off.....	892		
Flood Resilience	889		
Fly-tipping.....	886	SOLICITOR GENERAL	899
Food Security	888	Covid-19 Fraud.....	902
Government Support for Farmers	891	Rural Crime	901
International Trade Agreements	893	Serious Fraud Office.....	903
Nature-friendly Farming.....	892	Street Crime.....	905
Topical Questions	894	Victims' Right to Review Scheme	904
Water Pollution.....	890	Violence Against Women and Girls.....	899

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 14 November 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO	35WS	JUSTICE	43WS
New Coal Extraction Licences: Prohibition	35WS	Criminal Legal Aid.....	43WS
FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	35WS		
Diplomatic Immunity: Alleged Serious and Significant Offences 2023.....	35WS	PRIME MINISTER	44WS
Diplomatic Missions and International Organisations: Debts 2023-24	36WS	Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe: UK Delegation.....	44WS
HOME DEPARTMENT	42WS		
Director of Labour Market Enforcement: Interim Annual Strategy 2024-25	42WS	TRANSPORT	45WS
		East West Rail	45WS
		NATS Technical Failure: CAA Report.....	45WS

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Thursday 21 November 2024**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Thursday 14 November 2024

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 885] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Solicitor General

Council Tax [Col. 907]

Answer to urgent question—(Matthew Pennycook)

National Insurance Contributions: Healthcare [Col. 915]

Answer to urgent question—(Karin Smyth)

Business of the House [Col. 927]

Statement—(Lucy Powell)

Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015 (Extension) Bill [Lords] [Col. 952]

Motion for Second Reading—(Nick Thomas-Symonds)—agreed to
Programme motion—(Anna McMorrin)—agreed to

Aircraft Noise: Local Communities [Col. 967]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Respiratory Health [Col. 293WH]
General Debate

Written Statements [Col. 35WS]
