

**Wednesday
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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 8 January 2025

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Mathematical Sciences Academy

1. **Jack Rankin** (Windsor) (Con): If he will make it his policy to establish an academy for mathematical sciences. [901945]

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (**Peter Kyle**): The Government are committed to increasing the research and development allocation to a record £20.4 billion in 2024-25. Lord Vallance continues to meet mathematical science representatives to determine how best to support the sector. The Government are supporting the mathematical science sector in ways that best deliver for the taxpayer, without the time and expense required to set up a new organisation.

Jack Rankin: In the last financial year, the Department underspent by nearly £600 million. The proposed national maths academy was due to cost just £6 million—1% of that total. People are disappointed by this cancellation. Can the Secretary of State explain whether he cancelled the academy because he does not value the role of our national academies, or because he does not think mathematical sciences are important?

Peter Kyle: I have just explained all of the ways we are helping, assisting, supporting and driving mathematical science. The hon. Member has just listed all of the ways his party has failed that sector by underspending in many parts of Government and failing to commit the spending to the project that he is now calling on this Government to support.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that the recent announcement of new funding for research and development in the Budget gives the sector really good clarity about investment across the coming years and about the way forward that this Government wish to take?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's question. He is quite right to highlight that, finally, science and technology in this country has a Government on its side and putting their money where their mouth is.

AI: Copyright in the Creative Industries

2. **Ms Polly Billington** (East Thanet) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to protect the copyright of people working in the creative industries in the context of artificial intelligence. [901946]

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (**Chris Bryant**): We are absolutely determined to make sure that copyright and intellectual property are protected, as they always have been in this country. Our consultation is designed to do two specific things: to make sure there is legal certainty for AI developers and creative industries alike, and to make sure there is more licensing of copyright material by AI developers.

Ms Billington: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. However, visual artists earn far below the minimum wage, and rely on copyright royalties to finance their work and continue to contribute to our world-leading creative industries—in Thanet and across the country. What reassurances can the Minister give that the plans for a copyright exception for AI learning will not further contribute to that financial instability and weaken the lifeblood of our creative economy?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. She could big up her own constituency a little more, because Margate is probably one of the greatest centres of artists in this country. It is where Turner was trained and went to school, and where we have Turner Contemporary. It is also where Tracey Emin is doing so much work and many other artists as well. It is a brilliant hub.

We want to make sure—as we did in the last Labour Government, when we introduced the artist's resale right—that artists can earn a living from their art. That is what we are determined to do. Just as last year New Zealand and Australia entered into the same agreement for an artist's resale right, we want to make sure that there is a future revenue stream for every single artist in this country.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Does the Minister agree that transparency is crucial if creators are to understand where their works are being used by AI developers? Can he therefore assure me that the Government will legislate on transparency whatever the outcome of the consultation on copyright reform?

Chris Bryant: The right hon. Gentleman makes a good point about transparency, which is a key element of our consultation. We have presented a package because we want to ensure there is a win-win here. We want AI developers to have the legal certainty that they need to develop their products in the UK as UK producers, and for creative industries to know when their works are being used, so that if they want to say no they can say no, and if they want to say yes they will be properly remunerated for it.

NHS Diagnostic Processes: Technological Innovation

3. **Josh Newbury** (Cannock Chase) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on supporting technological innovation to accelerate NHS diagnostic processes. [901947]

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): My Department is working incredibly closely with the Department of Health and Social Care, and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and I are joined at the hip on these issues. That includes unprecedented investment in research and development to understand how better to diagnose disease. There is co-investment in initiatives such as health innovation networks, which have enabled 1.2 million patients to access proven innovations, and the digital centre of Government, which we have created, is partnering closely with the NHS to improve the deployment and innovation of technology.

Josh Newbury: I thank the Secretary of State for his response. My constituency of Cannock Chase has wide health inequalities, and particularly high levels of respiratory illness and bladder and brain cancer. In some parts of the country, NHS trusts are rapidly speeding up diagnostic waiting times by using highly accurate AI models, with the results checked by human clinicians. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Government are supporting such safe tech innovations to help fulfil our mission to build an NHS fit for the future?

Peter Kyle: I can indeed commit to that. The Government see the embrace of proven technologies and innovation as fundamental to the future survival of the NHS. I was incredibly happy to see that last autumn, the Royal Wolverhampton NHS trust began enrolling patients in a global-first trial of completely personalised cancer vaccines, as part of a £1 billion investment negotiated by my Department. That shows the way forward and how co-operation between Departments will deliver for patients and public service users across the country.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): Early diagnosis saves lives. Radox in my constituency runs a number of NHS health checks from the Isle of Wight through to Lanarkshire. Will the Secretary of State encourage greater use of those checks, and will he visit Radox with me to see how we can further advance that technology?

Peter Kyle: I confirm that I have been working with the Health Secretary—indeed, we recently visited St Tommy's across the road from here to see how new technology is being used in diagnostics. It is increasing the number of scans and improving the quality of those scans to diagnose disease early and prevent it from having the worst outcome. That is being rolled out across the country, and I am working closely with the Health Secretary to ensure that such innovations are put to good use for the country.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): Last month, the Select Committee brought festive cheer by hearing how British science is advancing the eradication of diseases such as cervical cancer, HIV/AIDS and malaria, through innovative and exciting new treatments and diagnostics. We also heard about the challenges of driving innovation through the NHS. Newcastle company AMLo Biosciences said that adoption is much quicker in the US, and others criticised bureaucratic procurement processes and a culture of inertia. Successive Governments have struggled with this challenge, so

what specific steps is the Secretary of State taking with the Health Secretary to ensure that British patients benefit from innovation?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for that question and for the work that my hon. Friend's Committee is doing to highlight the incredibly important challenge that we face as a Government and a country. For the first time, the Health Secretary has adopted the spreading of innovation through the NHS as a personal mission as part of the role of the Secretary of State, and we co-chair the Office for Life Sciences. Together, our two Departments are not only seeking to harness the power of technology, but working together, under the leadership of the Health Secretary, to drive that innovation. Such innovation cannot be locked up in one innovative health trust; it must be put to use across the NHS for every patient from every part of the United Kingdom.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What progress has been made on using AI algorithms to analyse medical images of things such as tumours, fractures or other medical conditions? That was a pithy question, I think, Mr Speaker.

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for the hon. Member's question. I have visited Huddersfield hospital, which is one of the first hospitals to fully integrate AI in its radiotherapy and scanning work. Having stood there and seen its power for early diagnosis through its ability to detect patterns at an incredibly early stage, I am left in no doubt that, had my mother been scanned at that hospital, she would still be alive today. She was scanned three times, but the progress of her lung cancer was missed and she died several weeks after collapsing, with it not having been detected. This is the power of technology. AI is a human power that will transform lives and we are determined to ensure—

Mr Speaker: Order. Secretary of State, please. I am sure you want me to get to the other questions. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Victoria Collins (Harpden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Many of the companies I have spoken to who are supporting technological innovation in the NHS and beyond talk about their frustration at the comparative difficulty of getting funding in the UK and say that the British Business Bank could do much more to de-risk investment and unlock innovation. What are the Government doing to reform funding and provide an oasis in what has become known as the funding valley of death?

Peter Kyle: The first thing that we have done is increase to record levels overall the Government's investment in R&D. Pioneering work is also going on through Innovate UK, the Advanced Research and Invention Agency and the different funding bodies that are available to take different levels of risk when it comes to supporting, creating and upscaling innovation. The work that the Chancellor is doing to reform our pension system will unlock capital, because fundamentally we must get more domestic capital into the venture capital community so that we can get domestic innovation supported by domestic capital to upscale and solve the challenges that the hon. Member talked about.

Gigabit Broadband: Rural Areas

4. **Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): If he will take steps to help tackle barriers to the roll-out of gigabit broadband to rural areas. [901948]

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): Only this week, we announced a £289 million contract that will deliver gigabit-capable broadband to 131,000 difficult-to-reach premises across England and Wales. We are determined to make sure that in every part of the country, including in the hon. Member's constituency, we reach all those places.

Sir Ashley Fox: I am grateful to the Minister for his answer. In some villages in my constituency such as Cannington and Nether Stowey, fewer than 10% of households have access to gigabit broadband, and download speeds are among the slowest in the country. Will he advise how his Department will ensure that, under the new contract, Openreach fulfils its obligations and my constituents get that faster broadband?

Chris Bryant: First, I commend the hon. Member, because this is the fourth time that he has asked a question of me broadly in this territory. In the words of Browning,

"Hark, the dominant's persistence till it must be answered to!"

He is quite right: there are villages in his constituency where there is no proper gigabit-capable internet available. I am determined to deal with that, and I am happy to meet him because, in the words of the musical "Oklahoma!", I am

"a girl who can't say no".

I am very happy to meet him—

Mr Speaker: I can say no. [*Laughter.*] Come on!

Employer National Insurance Contributions

5. **Rebecca Paul** (Reigate) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of increases in employer national insurance contributions on the science and technology sectors. [901949]

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): The Government have increased investment in R&D to record levels. We have also repaired the public finances, including the black hole left by the previous Administration. We have done so by protecting the smallest businesses through the impact of doubling the employment allowance to £10,500, meaning that 865,000 employers will pay nothing in additional tax.

Rebecca Paul: I thank the Secretary of State for his response. However, universities, which are at the heart of the UK's research ecosystem, face an additional £372 million in annual costs due to the rise in employer national insurance. That threatens their ability to fund cutting-edge research, recruit top talent and support early career researchers. Does he recognise the detrimental impact that will have on research in this country? Will he explore measures to ensure that our global competitiveness in science and innovation is not undermined?

Peter Kyle: We have found ways to get new investment into universities, which we are putting on a solid financial footing. This is just the start. We always knew that we could not fix all the problems that we inherited from that last Administration in six months, but we are finding ways to take that great start forward to get new investment into universities. I reassure the House that the war on universities by that Administration has ended.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. "Companies like ours will be less incentivised to grow".

That is the conclusion of Paul Taylor, founder of British tech unicorn Thought Machine, which employs more than 500 people. Britain is now missing out on new jobs and investment as a direct result of Labour's national insurance jobs tax. When the Chancellor started punishing our tech sector, the Secretary of State failed to stand up to her. Why?

Peter Kyle: We have put the public finances on a solid footing. Our economy is now stable in a way that has not been the case for 14 years. The Conservatives want all the benefits of the last Budget without saying how they will pay for any of it. Until they do, they will not be taken seriously by anyone, including the business that the hon. Gentleman referenced.

Alan Mak: The truth is that the Labour Government are failing our tech workers, because they do not care about our tech sector. Last September, Paul said that he was very keen to list Thought Machine in London instead of New York, and one of his preconditions before listing is being able to grow the business as much as possible. Why did the Secretary of State allow the Chancellor to make growth harder for Britain's tech sector at the Budget?

Peter Kyle: I think the hon. Gentleman missed the investment summit that the Government held just before Christmas, at which a record £60 billion was invested into this country, £24 billion of which was AI-related. That is almost as much going directly into AI as was committed in total at the previous Government's investment summit. This Government are unlocking investment; the previous Administration wrecked our economy and public services, and failed to secure faith in our economy for foreign companies to invest in this country.

Innovation: Staffordshire

6. **Leigh Ingham** (Stafford) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to increase levels of innovation in Staffordshire. [901950]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Feryal Clark): In case the House has not heard, this Government are driving innovation, with a record £20.4 billion of research and development investment for 2025-26, powering an innovation-led economy across the UK. In Staffordshire, UK Research and Innovation is backing more than £29 million for 70 cutting-edge research and innovation projects. A stand-out example is Innovate UK's support for the Staffordshire net zero skills for growth project, which is equipping the country to seize opportunities in the net zero transition.

Leigh Ingham: Towns such as those in my constituency are key to the economy, but can face unique challenges in accessing innovation opportunities. Please could the Minister tell me how she plans to ensure that towns such as Stafford and Eccleshall are able to access new jobs, skills, investment and growth opportunities?

Feryal Clark: The Department has a clear vision to ensure that the UK remains at the forefront of global innovation—a place where cutting-edge businesses of all sizes can start and grow, and where local people have high-quality jobs, building on local strengths. I am delighted to hear about the new multimillion-pound facility being built at Newcastle and Stafford colleges' Stafford campus in my hon. Friend's constituency, supported by £15 million of Government investment. It will welcome learners from September and will help to provide the technical skills that businesses need, both now and in the future, to support regional and national productivity.

Access to Public Services: Technology

7. **Lewis Atkinson** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to utilise technology to improve access to public services. [901951]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Feryal Clark): DSIT is leading the charge by establishing the digital centre of Government to harness technology and transform our public services. We are committed to improving digital inclusion and accessibility to ensure high-quality online services that are available to everyone. In the coming months, the Department will outline its plans and priorities for a digital centre and to advance digital inclusion.

Lewis Atkinson: Sunderland was recently named the UK's smartest city by *The Times*. It was a pleasure to welcome the Secretary of State when he visited recently. More than 5,000 homes in our city now have assistive technology installed, supporting the independence of older and disabled people and improving their access to care. How do the Government plan to build on the example of Sunderland to improve access to public services across the UK?

Feryal Clark: The Government recognise the potential for digital technology to support people to live independently. We will set new national standards for care technologies and develop trusted guidance so that people who draw on care, their families and care providers can confidently buy what works and get the safest, most effective tech into their homes or services. In addition, we will take forward a range of initiatives in 2025-26, including funding more home adaptations and promoting the better use of care technology.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): What steps is her Department taking to help older people who do not feel comfortable utilising technology to access public services?

Feryal Clark: The hon. Gentleman will be happy to hear that the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018 require most public sector organisations to ensure their services are accessible to disabled and older people by

meeting the requirements of the web content accessibility guidelines and by publishing an accessibility statement in the prescribed format. The Government Digital Service's accessibility monitoring team reviews public sector websites to ensure compliance with the accessibility regulations and supports Departments to improve their services.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I welcome the Minister's approach to improving access through technology. However, the majority of the concerns that colleagues and I receive are from those who cannot use technology. Rather than improving access, for some, technology can act as a barrier. What is her assessment of the impact of digital exclusion in the UK? Will the digital inclusion strategy that she has announced include digital exclusion at all levels of Government?

Feryal Clark: Digital inclusion is a priority for this Government. We have set up the digital inclusion and skills unit to ensure that everyone has the access, skills, support and confidence to participate in modern digital society, whatever their circumstances. Work is ongoing to develop our approach to digital inclusion and co-ordinate across Departments, and we hope to announce more on that soon. We will work closely with the third sector, the industry, devolved Governments and local authorities to ensure that future interventions are targeted and based on individuals' needs.

Topical Questions

T1. [901960] **Zöe Franklin** (Guildford) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): We have seen fear and lies spread about life in Britain, with those who have done little or nothing to combat child sexual abuse stretching every sinew to jump on the bandwagon. This Government are committed to justice for the victims and punishment for the perpetrators of abuse wherever it happens and whoever commits it, and I pay tribute to the work of the Prime Minister and, in particular, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), in that regard. The illegal content codes that Ofcom set out last month are the single biggest change to online safety for a generation.

Zöe Franklin: In 2023, the Lords Communications and Digital Committee found that 1.7 million households were without internet. Will the Secretary of State outline how the Government are working to ensure that no one is left behind by the forthcoming switchover to internet protocol television?

Peter Kyle: The hon. Lady asks an important question. Broadcast TV is legally protected until 2034. This Government are committed to ensuring audiences can access television in a way that suits them. Too many people are excluded from digital activity because they lack the basic skills. In the not-too-distant future, I will be launching the digital inclusion plan. I know that the hon. Lady takes cross-party working very seriously, so I hope she will meet me so I can brief her on that work and involve her ideas as we develop it.

T2. [901961] **Baggy Shanker** (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Globally, billions of pounds of investment are flowing into companies that are creating new technologies to power data centres, and communities across the UK should be sharing the opportunity of well-paid, skilled jobs that that investment offers. In Derby, Rolls-Royce is a world leader in the development of small modular reactors. Does the Secretary of State agree that Rolls-Royce shows British innovation at its strongest, and would be a dynamic partner for any technology company wishing to invest in the future?

Peter Kyle: I agree, of course. Technological innovation will be key to the move to net zero, and the UK will be at the forefront of that. SMRs are particularly exciting. I have met Rolls-Royce, which has a great advocate in my hon. Friend. I look forward to hearing more from him and seeing how we can support this exciting technology into the future.

T3. [901962] **Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): What steps are the Government taking to support pioneering British companies, such as Cranfield Aerospace Solutions in Mid Bedfordshire, in their pursuit of hydrogen-powered flight? How will the industrial strategy ensure that the UK remains a global leader in sustainable aviation technology?

Peter Kyle: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point, one that the Government are committed to. That is why we increased research and development spending to the highest of any Government in this country. It will have a direct impact on the issues he raises.

Mr Speaker: Before we begin PMQs, I am delighted to welcome to the Gallery the Speaker of the Lok Sabha of India.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked— **Engagements**

Q1. [902038] **Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 8 January.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): I wish all Members of this House a happy new year. Our thoughts are with those affected by the recent flooding. We thank the responders who are working hard to keep communities safe.

This week, we published our elective reform plan to rebuild our NHS and end the Tory backlog. We will deliver where the previous Government failed, empowering patients, boosting productivity, more care in the community and incentivising reform.

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

Neil Coyle: On behalf of everyone in Southwark and, I hope, the whole House, I offer the Prime Minister condolences on the loss of his brother over Christmas, and I wish everyone a happy new year.

Last July, the public overwhelmingly backed Labour's manifesto commitment to halving violence against women and girls. Can the Prime Minister set out how today's vote on the children's wellbeing Bill is a crucial step to delivering that promise and protecting children without the delay of an unnecessary further lengthy inquiry?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend and other colleagues for their remarks about my brother.

My hon. Friend raises a very important issue. Violence against women and girls, abuse and child sexual exploitation are sickening, and many victims have been let down for a very long time by warped ideas about community relations and the protection of institutions. He raises the question of inquiries. There have been a number of inquiries, both national and local, including one covering Oldham. Reasonable people can agree or disagree on whether a further inquiry is necessary. This morning, I met some of the victims and survivors of this scandal. They were clear with me that they want action now, not the delay of a further inquiry. The Jay inquiry, the last national inquiry, was seven years. A further inquiry would take us to 2031. Action is what is required.

But whatever anyone's view on whether a further inquiry is needed, what I find shocking is that anyone in this House would vote down the children's wellbeing Bill this afternoon, with vital protections for the most vulnerable in our society. I urge the Leader of the Opposition to withdraw her wrecking amendment.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): The whole House has heard that the Prime Minister lost his brother during the Christmas period, so can I offer him, on behalf of my party, our sincerest condolences?

The new year has started with a focus on the decades-long rape gang scandal. Across the country, thousands of girls were tortured and sexually abused at the hands of men who treated them as things to be used and disposed of, destroying many lives forever. The Prime Minister mentioned previous inquiries. He is right: there has been an inquiry into child sexual abuse, but it was not about the rape gang scandal. In its 468 pages, it mentioned Rotherham just once. Is the Prime Minister confident that we know the full extent of rape gang activity?

The Prime Minister: First, I thank the right hon. Lady for her condolences, and I thank her for reaching out over the Christmas period when I lost my brother. I really did appreciate that, and I appreciate it today.

On the question of a further inquiry, there have been a number of inquiries, some of them localised, including the Mayor of Manchester's recent inquiry. The national inquiry Professor Jay carried out took seven years. It had 20 recommendations, none of which were actually implemented by the Conservative party when it was in government. This is a really serious issue and we must focus, obviously, on the victims and survivors. There is no fixed view on the victims and survivors about a further national inquiry. There are mixed views. But there is a view, and I share this view, that what is needed now is action on what we already know. We already know—myself from personal knowledge when I was chief prosecutor—that warped ideas, myths and stereotypes about victims are at the heart of this. We have known

that for a decade. The Jay report called for mandatory reporting; I called for it 11 years ago. What we need now is action.

What cannot be tolerated is the idea that this afternoon Opposition Members will vote down a Bill that protects children—[*Interruption.*] Let me just say this. One of the provisions in that Bill is to protect vulnerable children today, who are out of school, to prevent abusers from ever taking those children out of school. I implore Opposition Members to defy the misleading leadership of the Leader of the Opposition and vote for a really important Bill.

Mrs Badenoch: I am shocked that the Prime Minister would say that actions were not taken. He knows full well that we accepted 18 of the 20 recommendations from the Jay inquiry, and went further, launching a gangs taskforce which found 550 more perpetrators. That shows that there is still work to be done. In Rotherham alone, there have been more than 1,400 victims. Across Oldham, Bradford, Bristol, Rochdale and dozens more towns, there have been thousands more victims, but no one has joined the dots. No one has the total picture, and it is almost certainly still going on.

One victim from Telford—I know the Prime Minister says that victims have different views; we have different views across this House—says that she wants a national inquiry because

“it will hold people accountable in a way that previous inquiries haven’t”

It is very possible to have actions, take on more, and still have a national inquiry. Why will the Prime Minister not listen to victims and launch a national inquiry which would have the power to summon witnesses and make them give evidence under oath?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady says that the last Government accepted the recommendations, but they did not act on them. One of the central recommendations was for mandatory reporting, and it still has not been enacted. I called for it 11 years ago. Opposition Members have been tweeting and talking; we have been acting.

The Leader of the Opposition has been a Member of Parliament for, I think, eight years, and her party were in government for seven and a half of those eight years. She was the Children’s Minister. She was the Women and Equalities Minister. I cannot recall her once raising this issue in the House, or once calling for a national inquiry. It is only in recent days that she has jumped on the bandwagon. In fairness, if I am wrong about that and she has raised it, I invite her to say so now, and I will happily withdraw the remark that she has not raised it in the House in the eight years she has been here, until today.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister is being very specific. I have raised this issue: I have raised it in speeches, and I have raised it publicly. The Prime Minister knows that as a Minister I would not have been speaking on this specific issue, because I was not a Home Office Minister, but let me remind him about other victims who came to me whom I did help. The victims of the Tavistock scandal came to me, as a Minister, and I did not send them away, like his Safeguarding Minister.

I made sure, as his Labour party was calling me transphobic, that we launched the Cass review, which even his Health Secretary has accepted. We do right by victims.

The reason why a national inquiry is important is that this issue is systemic. It involves local and national officials, the police, prosecutors and politicians. The Prime Minister talks about some of the local inquiries, but these interlinked issues cannot be covered by local inquiries alone. In fact, the leaders of the Manchester inquiry resigned because they could not get evidence, they could not summon witnesses, and not a single person in a position of authority has been held to account. The Prime Minister called for nine inquiries during the last Parliament. Does he not see that resisting this one means that people will start to worry about a cover-up?

The Prime Minister: This is an important issue, and we have to focus on the victims and survivors. The lies, misinformation and slinging of mud do not help them one bit. The right hon. Lady raised a victim’s question, and quite rightly too. I accept that victims and survivors are in different places on this. Those I have spoken to are worried about the delay of a further inquiry. The last inquiry took seven years, which would take us to 2031.

Among the issues that have been raised with me—the right hon. Lady has been speaking to victims, and they will have raised this with her—is that it is very hard for victims and survivors to come forward to explain what has happened to them. They do not want to be rushed through this process, which is why the last one took seven years. It is not sensible to suggest that it can be done in a hurry, on the cheap and comprehensively. That would take us to, let us say, 2030 or 2031. The victims I have spoken to want action today. I agree with them on that, but what I genuinely do not understand is why anybody would vote against the children’s wellbeing Bill, which will protect children who are vulnerable today. It will kill the Bill. It will stop the provisions for children at risk today. I implore the Opposition to vote for the Bill. Do not wreck it in this misguided way.

Mrs Badenoch: It is very possible to have shorter inquiries, especially if they cover areas that have not been looked at yet. We do not need to repeat the work that has already been done; let us look at new areas. Former Labour MP Ann Cryer said that there were councillors and MPs all over the country who knew what was going on but were terrified of being labelled racist.

A national inquiry would ask if there was a racial or cultural motivation behind some of these crimes, where white girls were seen, as Jack Straw said, as “easy meat”. The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) was sacked from Labour’s Front Bench for speaking out about rape gangs. Does the Prime Minister now recognise that sacking people for telling the truth creates a chilling effect that means victims are not listened to?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to call out anybody who has not acted properly in these cases. I have done it many, many times before, and it does not matter to me which political party they are in. I will call them out, and I will condemn them.

When I was chief prosecutor, I took measures to confront this issue head-on. The first of the mass prosecutions for an Asian gang was in Rochdale. My team came to see me, and they put a number of Asian men in the dock. They wanted the green light for the first of these cases to take place. I gave that green light, but on one condition, because it came to my attention that one of the men who was going into the dock had previously been arrested but not charged. I said, "You can bring the first of these mass prosecutions, but only if you look back at the file"—where we did not charge—"and tell me what went wrong in a report so that I can start to put it right." That is what started the reforms I brought about.

That is the approach I took in practice, while others were tweeting and talking. It is the approach I would take now in any case where there is wrongdoing here, but what we have got to do now—Professor Jay has said this. We have had a number of strong findings. There are 20 on the table from Professor Jay. We have got to get on with action; do not block it this afternoon.

Mrs Badenoch: We need to focus on what this is really about. This is not about the Prime Minister's work in the CPS, and I would say very respectfully to the Prime Minister that it is not about you; it is about the victims. Be a leader, not a lawyer. We know that people were scared to tell the truth because they thought they would be called racist. If we want to stop this from ever happening again, we cannot be afraid.

The Labour party has adopted the APPG definition of "Islamophobia". The same APPG report said that talking about sex groomers was an example of Islamophobia. This is exactly why people are scared to tell the truth, and the lack of clarity means that innocent British Muslims are smeared by association. That is not fair, and only a national inquiry can solve this. Will the Prime Minister look again at the Labour party's adoption of the definition of "Islamophobia" and its chilling effect, and rule out introducing it in government?

The Prime Minister: I will call out any aspect that has prevented anybody from coming forward, or any case from going forward, when it comes to violence against women and girls, child abuse or child sexual exploitation, as I have been doing for the best part of 15 years.

Yes, some people will say there should be a further inquiry—I accept that—but that means all the victims and survivors who give evidence need to be in a position to do so, and not all of them are. I have been speaking to them. Some think they are, but it will take time. All of the institutions will have to give evidence; that will take time. This will delay things until 2031.

We already know what the major flaws are. My argument is that we should get on with that action. That is why we are bringing forward the Bill this afternoon.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister has effectively told us that he is not able to do two things at the same time—[*Interruption.*] This issue of a delay is a weak excuse. I would say to him that, by refusing this inquiry, he is enabling those people who wish to smear all British Muslims based on the actions of a small minority. He is talking about distraction tactics. Let us have the truth.

The Prime Minister cannot tell the House the full scale of the scandal. He does not want questions asked of Labour politicians who may be complicit. He will not listen—[*Interruption.*] He will not listen to the victims who are calling for a national inquiry. He is making this all about this afternoon's Bill. Later today, he will tell Labour MPs, including those representing Telford, Rochdale, Bristol, Derby, Aylesbury, Oldham, Bradford, Peterborough, Coventry, Middlesbrough, Newcastle and Ramsgate, to vote against a national inquiry into the gangs that have systematically gang-raped children in their constituencies. This is one of the worst scandals in British history—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. This is a very, very important issue that matters to the country. It matters to all of our constituents, and I want to make sure they can hear what is being said by the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister.

Mrs Badenoch: This is one of the worst scandals in recent British history. How will Labour Members explain to their constituents that obeying the Prime Minister's Whip is more important than doing the right thing?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady is right to say it is one of the worst scandals; it is terrible. That is why I acted on it. Her recently acquired view is that it is a scandal, having spent a lot of time on social media over Christmas. Not once in eight years did she stand here and say what she has just said—not once in eight years. The previous Government did not act on the recommendations. They want a national inquiry. We had a national inquiry: the Jay inquiry. The report made 20 recommendations—not a single one implemented. She talked about doing two things at once. The Conservatives cannot kill the Bill this afternoon—wreck the Bill—and protect children.

Everyone will remember the dreadful case of Sara Sharif. This is the girl who was taken out of school and abused by an abuser. This afternoon's Bill fixes that gap. I am looking across the House, and I know there are hon. Members on the Opposition Benches who know very well that what is in this Bill is necessary, that it is the right thing to do, and would want to vote for the Bill. I urge them to think twice about following the short-sighted, misguided, bandwagon-jumping, non-leadership approach of the Leader of the Opposition.

Q3. [902040] Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): My constituent Annemarie, like countless other armed forces families across Aldershot and Farnborough, is living in shabby military accommodation which, after 14 years of Conservative neglect, is simply not good enough. I therefore welcome the Ministry of Defence plan to buy back thousands of homes in my constituency. Will the Prime Minister set out how sorting out the bad deal left by the Tory Government will make life better for Annemarie and others like her living at the home of the British Army?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. We all owe an extraordinary debt of thanks to those who serve. By reacquiring over 36,000 service family homes, including 1,700 in her constituency, we can rapidly transform substandard accommodation. The deal we have done also saves the taxpayer around

£230 million per year in rent and follows the largest pay rise for the armed forces in over 20 years. There is, of course, still work to do, but this is a major step forward.

Mr Speaker: I call the leader of the Liberal Democrats.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Happy new year, Mr Speaker. I join others in offering my personal condolences to the Prime Minister on the loss of his brother. May I take this opportunity to express my sadness at the passing of a much-loved member of the Liberal Democrat family, Baroness Jenny Randerson?

Fixing the care crisis is urgent for the millions of elderly and disabled people who are not getting the care they need, for the millions of family carers who are making huge sacrifices to fill the gap, and for the NHS, when over 12,000 people are stuck in hospital beds and cannot get out of hospital because the care is not there for them. The Prime Minister is right to say that we need a cross-party approach, but as Sir Andrew Dilnot has said today, that need not take three years. Will the Prime Minister please speed up that work so that 2025 is the year we finally rise to the challenge of fixing care?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising this important issue and thank him for his condolences. Yes, we do need to get this right. I want a cross-party consensus on the issue and I invite him to work with us, as I know he will. It is important and he is right to say that we need some action now. We have taken immediate action by providing £3.7 billion of additional funding in the Budget for social care and another £86 million to allow 7,800 more disabled and elderly people to live more independent lives, and we have increased the carer's allowance. We have set this up in stages, so we can act and improve as we go along, while making sure we have consensus for the bigger changes that may be proposed in the review. I invite him and Members from across the House to work with us, so we can get this right and ensure what we put in place endures beyond just a few years.

Ed Davey: If the Government do not bring in long-term social care reforms this year, their NHS reforms in this Parliament will fail, so I hope the Prime Minister will revisit the timetable.

Moving on, while the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) may miss out on his big allowance from Elon Musk, the spectre of the richest man in the world trying to buy a British political party should give us all pause for thought. After years of the Conservatives taking millions of pounds of Russian money, will the Prime Minister now work with us to bring in long overdue reforms to party funding, so that power in this country lies with the voters, not wealthy overseas oligarchs?

The Prime Minister: I think we all had a smile on Sunday when the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) said how cool it was to have the support of Musk, only for Musk to say he should be removed just a few hours later—that is the rough and tough of politics. Of course, we are looking at the question of funding more generally.

Q5. [902042] Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): I welcome the efforts this Labour Government have made to reset our relationship with the European Union and to seek

to remove unnecessary trade barriers. The trading links between the UK and mainland Europe are of particular importance to my constituency, so will the Prime Minister support my efforts, and those of other Kent colleagues, to restore an international train service to Ashford International station to help economic growth in my constituency, Kent and the wider south-east?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this question. Businesses in his constituency have been badly let down by the deal made by the last Government. We are resetting and strengthening that relationship, on the economy, energy and security, to deliver the growth we need. I know this is an issue of considerable frustration to his constituents. The decision in question is ultimately for Eurostar, but we are keen to see international services reinstated to Ashford as soon as possible and I will be happy for the Rail Minister to update him on the latest discussions.

Mr Speaker: I call the leader of the Scottish National party.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I will begin by doing something unusual, which is to commend the Prime Minister on his earlier answers to the Leader of the Opposition. I also pass on my party's condolences to him on the loss of his brother.

Outside this place, temperatures continue to plummet, energy bills continue to rise and the winter fuel allowance has been unacceptably taken away from so many vulnerable pensioners. The Prime Minister intimated prior to Christmas that he had no regrets about any of the decisions that he has taken in office. Does he understand that the public do?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his condolences.

We took some tough decisions. They led to a Budget that delivered the largest settlement to Scotland since devolution began. If he thinks we should now reverse that, he should say so. The money has been given, so now the SNP has the money, the power and no more excuses for the non-delivery that we see in Scotland. If the right hon. Gentleman wants me to reverse that, he should say so.

Q6. [902043] Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Feeling safe in our communities is among the most basic of human needs, but after 14 years of Tory cuts to Durham's frontline police—[*Interruption.*] After breaking the criminal justice system, too many of my constituents are victims of violence, theft and antisocial behaviour and those crimes too often go unpunished. I know the Prime Minister has had a lifelong commitment to protecting victims. What assurances can he give my constituents that our new Government will be tough on crime and on the causes of crime?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to raise that important issue. I have to say, when he said that there were cuts to police and somebody opposite said "Boring!", that tells us everything we need to know about the last 14 years. My hon. Friend is right: we need to crack down on those committing vile acts in our

communities. That is why our plan for change puts 13,000 extra police and police community support officers into neighbourhood policing, and includes a 3.5% real-terms increase and tough new respect orders. Where they lost control, we will take back control and deliver safe and secure communities.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): My constituent Dipak first opened the doors to his pharmacy in 1991 and he has been serving the Chelmsford community ever since, greeting many of his patients by name. However, Dipak's business is struggling. His NHS contract no longer covers the cost of the drugs he has to dispense. For example, he has sometimes been forced to pay over 100 times more than his contract provides for a particular mental health drug. Dipak is dipping into his life savings to keep his pharmacy afloat and I am sure that many other pharmacists across the country are doing the same. Does the Prime Minister agree that no pharmacist should be forced to use their own money to keep their pharmacy viable?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that important and challenging case. Community pharmacists like Dipak play a vital role in our health service. As she knows, the Department of Health and Social Care sets drug tariff prices and regularly assesses what pharmacies are reimbursed to ensure that overall they are paid fairly. If the hon. Lady is prepared to share the details further with me, I will have a review carried out by the team of the case she has raised.

Q7. [902044] **Mr Mark Swards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Last year, I was honoured to accept an invitation from the European Jewish Association to go to Krakow and discuss the role of Holocaust education in tackling the rising tide of antisemitism across Europe. We also visited Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau, where we laid wreaths and paid tribute to the many victims of the Holocaust. Given that this month marks the 80th anniversary of the liberation of those evil places, will the Prime Minister set out what this Government are doing on Holocaust education to ensure that never again means never again?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that. Antisemitism is completely abhorrent and has no place whatsoever in our society. I recently met Jewish community leaders in Downing Street to discuss what further we can do to combat antisemitism, and that includes allocating £54 million for the Community Security Trust to continue its vital work, committing to building a new Holocaust memorial and learning centre and providing at least £2.2 million to continue the funding for Lessons from Auschwitz. I look forward to working with others on those important proposals.

Q4. [902041] **Victoria Collins** (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Businesses such as Hicks in Harpenden, charities such as the Hospice of St Francis in Berkhamsted, and health and social care providers such as the Elms medical practice in Harpenden, are among those up and down this country that are warning the Government about the negative impact of the proposed changes to national insurance contributions. When will the Prime Minister heed those

warnings and, at the very least, look at exemptions for health and social care providers, as has been done for the NHS?

The Prime Minister: We had to deliver a Budget to wipe the slate clean, to deliver a stable basis for our economy and, at the same time, to repair our public services. That is why we invested £25.6 billion over two years in the NHS, including additional funding for GPs and hospices. We are taking measures to ensure that funding is there to support our vital services.

Q11. [902048] **Dame Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Every week, I visit constituents living in the most appalling, overcrowded social housing, some with triple bunk beds in the bedroom and the parents on a sofa bed in the living room. The nearest available property to buy would be £500,000, and that is out of reach for these hard-working families. I really welcome our Government's commitment to 1.5 million new homes. Will the Prime Minister agree that we need clear targets for the number of social housing units, so that families in Hackney can live in dignity?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend describes an appalling housing situation, and one that will be familiar to a number of MPs on both sides of the House. That is why we will deliver the 1.5 million homes that we desperately need across the country. The Budget announced £500 million for the affordable homes programme—that is hugely important—£100 million of which will go the Greater London Authority. We will also reform the right to buy, to deliver a fairer, better value and more sustainable scheme where long-standing tenants can buy their own home.

Q9. [902046] **Andrew George** (St Ives) (LD): Over the past 10 years, more than £500 million has been handed to holiday home owners in Cornwall through various tax loopholes, while local families are being evicted from their homes to make way for yet more holiday homes. As the housing crisis worsens, the six Cornwall MPs are determined to reverse this situation and address the issues before the end of this Parliament. Will the Prime Minister agree to meet us, so that we get the full backing of Government and deliver first, rather than second, homes for the good of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this matter. We are committed to building those 1.5 million homes, which includes 4,500 new homes every year in Cornwall. I do recognise the point that the hon. Member makes, which is that excessive concentrations of short-term lets and second homes in places such as Cornwall can impact the availability and affordability of homes. That is why we will enable councils to charge a premium on the council tax bills of second homes, abolish the furnished home lettings regime and introduce a registration scheme for short-term lets. I am happy to make sure that he and his Cornish colleagues get the meeting that they want with the Housing Minister to discuss that further.

Q13. [902050] **Josh Fenton-Glynn** (Calder Valley) (Lab): This Government are committed to using the criminal justice system to tackle violence against women and girls, but when an abuser can use a child custody battle to continue their abuse, as has happened in the case of

one of my constituents, it is clear that we need to raise the issue in the civil courts too. Will the Prime Minister please look at ending the absurd assumption that a domestic abuser's involvement in a child's life is advantageous to their welfare?

The Prime Minister: Yes, absolutely. My hon. Friend is right; family courts must never be a tool that domestic abusers can use to continue their appalling abuse. That is why we are expanding the number of new pathfinder courts to provide dedicated support to survivors and protect the welfare of children. We are reviewing the presumption of parental involvement and will set out our position in due course. I will make sure that he meets the relevant Minister to discuss this further.

Q10. [902047] **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): May I associate myself with the remarks of the Liberal Democrat leader and others today? I wish a happy new year to everyone, but 2025 is already proving a challenge for many of my constituents—pensioners, families, small businesses, the hospitality industry, GPs and social care providers, as others have said. They know that the SNP has failed to deliver for Scotland. They hear the Prime Minister when he says that the Conservatives left the economy in a mess, and they know that Governments have to make difficult decisions. But what they are asking me is: when will this Government do something positive for them to overcome the negative impacts that they are facing from the Budget?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. May I express to her something that I should have expressed to the Leader of the Liberal Democrats, which is our condolences about Jenny Randerson? I apologise; I overlooked that earlier.

The hon. Lady raises the failure of the SNP and the legacy of the Tories. I am proud that this Labour Government delivered the largest budget settlement for Scotland since devolution. That means, in answer to her question, that 100,000 workers in Scotland benefit from the increases to the national minimum and living wages each year. An estimated 3.2 million people in Scotland will benefit from the extension of the 5p cut in fuel duty, which of course comes on top of the £125 million to set up Great British Energy in Aberdeen. It reinforces the point that the SNP has the powers but has a terrible record, and the Tories left a terrible legacy. We are getting on with delivering for Scotland.

Q14. [902051] **Josh Newbury** (Cannock Chase) (Lab): Last year, this Labour Government delivered justice for members of the mineworkers' pension scheme, and 45,000 members of the similar British coal staff superannuation scheme are keen to see their £2.3 billion investment reserve returned to them, which could boost coalfield communities such as mine in Cannock Chase. Will the Prime Minister meet retired miners, trustees and coalfield MPs to discuss what can be done for BCSSS members up and down the country?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. I was pleased that the first increased payments to mineworkers' pension scheme members were made at the end of November. I understand the strong feelings on the British coal staff superannuation

scheme, which is why the Minister for industry met the trustees last year. We will work with the coal staff trustees to consider their proposals once the new mineworkers' pension scheme arrangements have been agreed.

Q12. [902049] **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): First, we had a Chancellor who embellished her CV, then we had a Transport Secretary with a fraud conviction, and now we have an anti-corruption Minister who is being investigated for corruption. I know that the Prime Minister likes living in free accommodation, but does he really think that it is appropriate that his Minister is being given free housing by the political allies of some very dubious foreign regimes?

The Prime Minister: The City Minister has acted appropriately by referring herself to the independent adviser. We brought in our new ministerial code to allow Ministers to ask to establish the facts, and I am not going to give a running commentary on that important exercise.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the help that you have given me over the last couple of days. I wrote to the England and Wales Cricket Board regarding the upcoming game against Afghanistan on 26 February, and the championship trophy. I have met with the ECB, and we are calling for the game to be boycotted. I thank everybody for the support that I have had across this House and in the other place. I also thank the Prime Minister very much for his intervention with the International Cricket Council yesterday, but will he please agree to meet his counterparts in South Africa and Australia, and ask them to boycott the games as well?

The Prime Minister: There has been an appalling erosion of the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan. We should all condemn that suppression of freedoms in the strongest terms. That is why we have provided additional aid, at least 50% of which will go to women and girls. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport is in touch with our international counterparts on this issue. I welcome the England and Wales Cricket Board making strong representations to the International Cricket Council on Afghanistan's women's cricket team.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Setting aside the matter of grooming gangs, the Opposition amendment on today's Order Paper sets out very clearly why the Bill that we will be debating is so deeply flawed. If it is to become an Act of Parliament, it will have to be completely rewritten in Committee. The Prime Minister has made much from the Dispatch Box of his service as the public prosecutor, so could he tell the House why, during his time in that capacity, he declined to instigate a prosecution, for rape and sexual abuse, against Mohamed Fayed?

The Prime Minister: That case never crossed my desk.

Mr Speaker: That completes Prime Minister's questions.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During an answer about police numbers, the Prime Minister said that someone on the Conservative Benches shouted “Boring!” May I correct the record following a request from *Hansard*? I actually

said “Bingo!”, because of the repetitive and overused clichés that the Prime Minister was using.

Mr Speaker: You have corrected the record. I would not have owned up in the way you did, but there we are.

Quantitative Easing (Prohibition)

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

12.41 pm

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Reform): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prohibit quantitative easing; to prohibit the Government from indemnifying any losses that may result from quantitative easing; and for connected purposes.

The purpose of this draft legislation is to ensure that the state is as economically accountable to the people as the people are to the state. That means terminating the state's ability to debase the value of money through practices such as quantitative easing, which is not an option for the individual. Clipping, sweating, plugging and cutting are forms of coin debasement either by Government or individuals. The most famous modern UK example was the great debasement between 1544 and 1551, when Henry VIII reduced the gold and silver content of coinage by the use of base metals such as copper in order to fund his bacchanalian overspending and wars with France. It has been a common feature of Government behaviour over the 5,000 years of gold trading history, and it continues today in the form of quantitative easing.

With no gold standard to constrain unproductive investment and direct capital to sound and profitable investment ventures, policymakers today have become obsessed with short-term stimuli centred on the performance of stock and bond markets. Central banks have become uncontrolled, unconstrained and reckless in their pursuit of delivering non-stop, unsustainable global growth driven by credit.

QE is what third-world dictators used to indulge in shortly before their currencies descended into chaos, but it has now become a mainstream tool to avoid the Darwinian reality of capitalism. History is littered with examples of Governments, dictators and kings abusing their hard-working citizens. Coinage during Rome's ascendant years was bolder, larger and widely accepted, but it reduced in size, weight and content as her empire waned. There was John Law's Mississippi scheme in France in 1716 to 1720, when he and the Duke of Orléans, who was regent for Louis XV, presided over an establishment-backed scheme on the premise that paper money was preferable to gold or a metal-backed currency, and that shares were a superior form of money as they paid dividends. It was, in essence, the first national central bank. It ended in chaotic collapse, and it badly damaged France and her economy. National debt was supported by printed money in the same way as today through QE via central banks globally. I fear that the ending will be the same in due course.

In Weimar Germany, after the first world war, the Reichsbank had become accustomed to printing money to fund the wartime economy, increasing marks in circulation from two billion to 45 billion between 1914 and 1919. State debt rose by 30 times, from 5 billion marks to 153 billion marks. That continued with the value of the mark going into freefall in early 1923 and the issuance of notes of up to 100 trillion marks, before sense returned. It was a time of moral decline, short-termism and prostitution that benefited the opportunists, not

the long-term wealth creators. With currency devaluation came a decline in all that had previously been cherished, including loyalty, faith, morals, innocence and honour.

Over recent times, capitalism in the UK and globally has been undermined as states have grown in size and central banks have distorted logic. Systemic risk management via the clearing banks in the '70s was gradually replaced by more overt interventions, including by Alan Greenspan in 1987, and in 1997 when Long-Term Capital Management, an offshore company, was bailed out by the US Government. The year 2008 was a watershed moment, when Gordon Brown bailed out financial institutions at an estimated cost to taxpayers of £137 billion, followed by quantitative easing between March 2009 and August 2016. That was dwarfed by the actions of Hank Paulson and Ben Bernanke in the US in 2008. They used \$700 billion of intervention to prop up the financial system generally, particularly AIG.

During the covid crisis of 2020 and 2021, when many bad decisions were taken by an already bloated state, between £310 billion and £410 billion—equivalent to between £4,600 and £6,100 per person in the UK—was spent in a number of questionable centrally planned interventions. In rather the same way as early Weimar Germany, Britain finds itself heavily indebted and continuing to run multiple deficits, making matters progressively worse. Our moral decline is clearly evident, as true capitalism has been undermined by regular intervention, increasing state regulation and a growing, bloated and inefficient state. It is interesting that Weimar Germany's revival started with the dismissal of many civil servants, and social welfare spending being massively cut.

The French Government's recent funding crisis makes it look even more like a national Ponzi scheme than in the UK. Both wings of French politics refused to sanction debt reduction despite the budget deficit being expected to rise to over 113% of GDP by this year. Market concerns are pushing the euro lower and France's borrowing costs higher, with bond yields briefly surpassing Spain's for the first time since 2008.

Javier Milei, Argentina's President since 2023, has brought significant economic reforms with his radical libertarian agenda, earning both praise and criticism. Milei's focus has been on cutting public sector spending, reducing inflation and implementing drastic fiscal adjustments, which have led to improvements in Argentina's economy. Inflation has fallen from nearly 300% to around 119%, public sector jobs have been reduced by 35,000, and the country has achieved a primary fiscal surplus. Argentina's economy has also exited recession, with a growth rate of 3.9%, and borrowing costs have dropped, signalling reduced debt default risks.

Elon Musk has been appointed to lead Donald Trump's new Department of government efficiency, which he will co-run with Trump ally and entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy. Musk said that the Department's creation would address Government waste and inefficiency. Trump described DOGE as a transformative initiative aimed at slashing bureaucracy, cutting regulations and restructuring federal agencies, and likened it to the Manhattan project. Money is the foundation of all human exchange of enterprise and replaced barter in the earliest communities. It allows for the transfer of skills through a transferable medium such as a coin, a note or indeed a transfer. By a continuous process of inflation, no matter how it is

perpetrated, Governments can confiscate—secretly and unobserved—an important part of the wealth of their citizens. As they do so, the size of the state inevitably grows, and it becomes a self-serving, greedy master of the people it should be serving. Common-sense logic and human relationships among working people are inevitably undermined, and there is a general moral decline in society. Taxes should be transparent, justifiable and simple. The cost of government should be covered by taxes alone, limiting the growth of excessive statism. Gold has historically been the standard store of value and protection against currency debasement for over 5,000 years. It is interesting that profligate Governments always denigrate gold-holding, and holding it is often banned by Governments in crisis who have deceived their electorate.

The words of President Woodrow Wilson after he signed the Federal Reserve Act should serve as a warning to all of us: “I am a most unhappy man. I have unwittingly ruined my country. A great industrial nation is controlled by its system of credit. Our system of credit is concentrated. The growth of the nation, therefore, and all our activities are in the hands of a few men. We have come to be one of the worst ruled, one of the most completely controlled and dominated Governments in the civilised world—no longer a Government by free option, no longer a Government by conviction and the vote of the majority, but a Government by the opinion and duress of a small group of dominant men.”

Friedrich von Hayek, an eminent Austrian-school economist, said:

“I do not think it is an exaggeration to say history is largely a history of inflation, usually inflations engineered by governments for the gain of governments.”

Given the historical track record of states abusing their citizens by various forms of currency debasement, including QE, the default position should be to make it illegal, unless this democratically elected House has an informed vote supporting debasement. This Bill seeks to achieve that position, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Mr Speaker: Order. One of us has to sit down, Rupert—I have got to do my bit. You come back in a minute.

Who will prepare and bring in the Bill?

Rupert Lowe: Richard Tice, Jim Allister, myself and others, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: You have got to name them. You cannot not name them.

Rupert Lowe: James McMurdock—[*Interruption.*] Maybe Rachel Reeves, I don’t know. [*Laughter.*]

Mr Speaker: Can you just read the names for clarity, so that *Hansard* has them?

Rupert Lowe: Richard Tice, Jim Allister, James McMurdock, Lee Anderson and myself, Mr Speaker.

Ordered,

That Rupert Lowe, Richard Tice, Jim Allister, James McMurdock and Lee Anderson present the Bill.

Rupert Lowe accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 January, and to be printed (Bill 155).

Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill

Second Reading

[Relevant documents: Seventh Report of the Education Committee of Session 2022-23, Persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils, HC 970, and the Government response, Session 2023-24, HC 368; Oral evidence taken before the Education Committee on 17 December 2024, on Children's Social Care, HC 430]

Mr Speaker: The reasoned amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition has been selected.

12.53 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

In the week in which we return to this House and our children return to school, I am proud to be the Secretary of State for Education in a truly child-centred Government. The actions I take and the decisions I make are always in pursuit of what is best for the children of this country, and that starts with keeping them safe. After little more than six months in power, we are delivering the change that is many years overdue. No more lessons learned, no more paper pushing and no more foot dragging: it is time for Government to act, and this Government will act with the urgency that our children deserve and our country demands.

This Bill puts forward bold new measures to keep children safe. These include a new legal obligation for safeguarding partners to work hand in hand with education, because it is often teachers who first see the signs of abuse and neglect; a new duty to establish multi-agency child protection teams, because keeping children safe is everyone's business; a new power to put in place a unique identifier for children, sharing information so that no child falls through the cracks; a new compulsory register of children not in school in every area of England, because if children are not in school, we need to know where they are; and a new requirement for local authority consent for parents to home-educate their children if they are on a child protection plan or subject to child protection inquiries. I respect parents' rights to make choices about their child's education, but children's safety must always come first, and under this Government, their safety will always come first.

Let us be crystal clear: a vote against this Bill today is a vote against the safety of our children, against their childhoods and against their futures. Today, Conservative MPs have a choice: they can choose to back measures to protect children, or they can choose to chase headlines. They can choose to transform the lives of the most vulnerable young people in this country, or they can choose to sacrifice their safety for political gain. They can choose to show the public that they have finally learned the lessons of their resounding election defeat, or they can show voters that they are still unfit to govern. I want to be very clear that the conduct of politicians, be they on the Conservative Benches or anywhere else, who put the pursuit of headlines today above the safety of children tomorrow is sickening and shameful. A previous generation of Conservative politicians would not have had the slightest hesitation in saying that the conduct of today's Opposition in seeking to block this Bill is quite simply beneath contempt.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): The Secretary of State has mentioned previous generations of politicians, and all of us in this House must recognise that we follow in the footsteps of giants. Tony Blair, Lord Adonis and others created the academy system that was built on under the last Conservative Government and brought about a transformation of English education. Why does the Secretary of State want to dismantle decades of work by Members across this House and bring about a gross socialist uniformity that will destroy the progress that has been made?

Bridget Phillipson: That is simply a mischaracterisation, and the right hon. Gentleman knows it. I will come on to the wider schools measures in this Bill later in my speech, but I note that he had nothing to say in his intervention about the safety of children and the measures we are discussing today. The wrecking amendment that the Leader of the Opposition has tabled would block the very important, very serious measures that the Conservatives have been telling us for days they want to see put in place. If they want those measures, they need to support them.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) mentioned uniformity, but the only uniform measures I can see in the Bill are about saving parents money on uniform bills, which I think we can all welcome. Does the Secretary of State agree that the fragmentation of the school system created by the last Government led to many young people falling through the gaps, which is a huge issue?

Bridget Phillipson: I will come on to the wider point of collaboration later in my speech. Collaboration across the school system is crucial, but my hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the really important measures in the Bill that will put more money back in parents' pockets by cutting the cost of school uniforms and bringing in breakfast clubs in primary schools across our country.

This is child-centred legislation through and through—legislation that backs parents to do the best for their children. This Government are on a mission to break down the barriers to opportunity, driven forward by the plan for change unveiled by the Prime Minister in December. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill is a huge step forward in that journey of reform, starting with child safety and building from there. It is an agenda for excellence—for safe and secure childhoods, because healthy and happy futures are built on nothing less. It is an agenda for excellence—for high and rising standards, because we will accept nothing less. It is an agenda for excellence—for a top-quality core offer in all of our schools, because parents demand nothing less. It is an agenda for excellence, because every child in this country deserves nothing less. That is what mission-led government is all about: child-centred action across Departments, between professions and through partnership.

What matters about families is not the shape that they have, but the love they give. That is why, back in October, we announced the expansion of our work on fostering and on the trialling of a new kinship care allowance. It is why, in November, I came to this House to set out the biggest reform of children's social care in

a generation. It is why this Government then backed those changes with almost £300 million of investment, including the biggest ever investment in kinship care. It is why today I return to this House to cement our reforms in legislation, and to build a children's social care system that is forward-looking, excellence-driven and child-centred.

Our first priority is to keep children with their family wherever it is safe to do so, so the Bill mandates all local authorities to offer family group decision making. With the guidance of skilled professionals, families with children at risk of falling into care will be supported to build a plan that works for them. We are strengthening support for kinship care, so that vulnerable children can live with the people they know and trust, wherever that is possible.

However, despite the best efforts of all involved, some children will inevitably need to enter care, so we must reform the system so that it works for them. I know that Members right across this House share my outrage at the excessive and exploitative profit making that we have seen from some private providers. It is shameful, it is unacceptable, and it will end.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I know that my right hon. Friend has a good head for numbers. Will she be doing some evaluation of the cost and benefits of investing in kinship care, so that we can reduce not just the cost to the child, but the cost to the taxpayer of expensive child social care?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In my time with her on the Public Accounts Committee, I learned all too well the importance of those principles. The previous Government had work under way on understanding not just the benefits for children of staying close to those who can care for them best, but the spiralling costs and the need to take action. However, what we did not see from that Government was action, and that is why we are today making sure that we deliver better for our children.

This Bill gives the Government, through the Secretary of State, the power to introduce a profit cap. Providers should take note: we will not hesitate to use this power to protect our most vulnerable children. Children must always have somewhere to live if private providers unexpectedly collapse. That is why this Bill introduces a new financial oversight scheme to increase transparency and strengthen forward planning. Children need support when they leave care, too, so the Bill will require all local authorities to offer care leavers emotional and practical support through the Staying Close programme—support in finding a great place to live, support in accessing the right services at the right time, and support in going on to live a healthy, happy life.

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill provides the safe and secure foundation that all children need, and it builds on that foundation with urgent reform to all our schools, so that every child can achieve and thrive. That means schools being at the beating heart of their communities. That is why this Bill legislates for free breakfast clubs in every state-funded primary school, so that children get a welcoming, softer start to the day. It means schools where children come together to eat, learn and grow. It is good for attendance, good for attainment and good for behaviour.

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): Before my election, I spent nearly 20 years as a secondary school teacher, seeing at first hand the devastating effects of food poverty on children's health, concentration and academic performance. I welcome the introduction of free breakfast clubs in primary schools, which will improve child health and learning outcomes in England, as seen in Wales. However, I urge further action to ensure that all children can thrive. Will the Government consider extending free breakfasts to secondary school students, and will consideration be given to access to free school lunches as well?

Bridget Phillipson: We will of course always keep further action under review. Through the child poverty taskforce, which I co-chair the Work and Pensions Secretary, we are considering what further action is required to make sure that families have more money in their pockets and can increase their income, and will take action. The growing number of children we have seen in poverty in our country is a source of national shame, and Conservative Members are responsible for that record.

School uniform is important for building a sense of community, but too many families tell us that the cost remains a heavy burden, so our Bill limits the number of branded items that schools can require pupils to have, putting money back in parents' pockets.

I want children in school and ready to learn, and that is why the Government's plan for change sets a milestone for record numbers of five-year-olds reaching a good level of development. That is vital for giving every child the best start in life, but that is just the beginning, because I want high and rising standards for every child in every school. That is one of the surest ways that we can break the link between background and success for millions of children. That matters for every child, not just a lucky few. Life should not come down to luck. When Governments forget that, it is not the children of Conservative Members who lose out; it is working-class kids across our country. I know that better than most, and I will take no lectures from the Conservative party on what it takes to deliver better life chances for working-class kids.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Reported figures for 2022 and 2023 show an increase in the proportion of children living in low-income families, and no change in the proportion of children living in absolute low-income families. Does the Secretary of State agree that the Bill will improve the household finances of families and the life chances of children in my constituency of Wolverhampton West?

Bridget Phillipson: Absolutely. The Bill will put hundreds of pounds back into family finances and back into parents' pockets by cutting the cost of school uniform, and by introducing breakfast clubs in every state-funded primary school. However, we recognise that there is so much more we need to do, because child poverty scars the life chances of far too many in our country.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Could the Secretary of State comment on the falling rolls in some parts of this country, particularly London? Most local authorities unfortunately take the option of closing schools, which is very damaging to children and to local communities. Clause 50 appears to give her some powers

[Jeremy Corbyn]

of intervention, so we could perhaps instead downsize such schools, which would mean we kept the sense of them being community schools. That is so important, particularly in the poorest parts of many London boroughs. Can she give us some hope that there will be intervention, so that we keep community schools?

Bridget Phillipson: A number of provisions in the Bill deal precisely with that challenge. We recognise that in London—but shortly this will be the case right across our country—there are challenges that come with falling rolls and making sure that we manage that properly. That will require schools to work with local councils, and to collaborate on managing admissions and place planning. It will also require decisions on how we make best use of the schools estate. That is why we have started encouraging primary schools to bid to open primary-based nurseries. The recent pilot programme for that has closed, and we were delighted to see so many applications. There is also an opportunity to think about using the space that will open up as a result of falling rolls to create additional provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities, so that they can go to a school much closer to home, and can go to school with their friends, in their local community.

There has been welcome consensus that a high-quality state education should be the right of all children. That consensus has helped to ensure that innovations—from Ofsted to the national curriculum and academies—have stood the test of time, as Governments of all parties have driven reform. Academies, introduced by the last Labour Government and expanded by the Conservative party, have been instrumental in raising standards in our school system. They have delivered brilliant results, particularly for the most disadvantaged children, and they will continue their record of excellence under this Labour Government. However, this consensus must not stifle progress. While the Conservative party did make some progress over the past 14 years, it must reckon with its many failures. For example, one in four children leaves primary school without meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths. Tens of thousands of children do not secure good maths or English GCSEs. One in five children is regularly absent from school; they are unable to learn if they are not there, and hold back their classmates when they return. There are also hundreds of thousands of children in schools that perform poorly year after year.

Protecting the foundations should not mean that we do not build on them. After a decade of stagnation—I say a decade because Conservative Members will remember a time when they had an Education Secretary who was determined to deliver reform—now is the time to press on and, once again, deliver for our children. Members will see in the Bill a respect for the fundamentals, twinned with the drive to go further and deliver high and rising standards for each and every child. We inherited a system that was too fragmented, and that too often incentivised harmful competition over helpful collaboration.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): The Secretary of State gives a lot of important statistics about how our children are developing, but their mental

health and wellbeing is also important. Will she consider a national wellbeing measurement, so we can look at improving the wellbeing of our children?

Bridget Phillipson: I welcome the hon. Lady's interest in this area, because I share her concern about the growing number of children in our country who are deeply unhappy, and the growing challenge of mental ill health and ensuring wellbeing. Far too many children do not receive access to timely support, and we are looking carefully at the issue that she identifies.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): On children's welfare and making sure that children start the school day in the best position to learn, I thank my right hon. Friend for bringing forward plans for breakfast clubs, so that children are ready to learn, not only because they have had a good meal, but because they are eased into the school day. Does she agree that that will help young children, and particularly kids with special educational needs, to learn?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree with my hon. Friend. We have been led by the evidence on this, which is clear: this measure provides real support to parents at the start of the school day, but also delivers benefits for children's learning, development, academic outcomes and behaviour. I am delighted that in April we will start rolling out the first pilot across schools, including schools serving children with special educational needs and disabilities, demonstrating the difference that this Labour Government will make to children's life chances.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I am sure that all Members of the House share the right hon. Lady's objective of ensuring that children get the best education and have the best educational outcomes possible, but why is she dismantling the infrastructure that has delivered improvements? We have specialist schools, schools able to attract the best teachers, and schools able to tailor their curriculum to their pupils. Why does she want to dismantle that, if she wants to improve educational standards?

Bridget Phillipson: That is just not the case. I invite him to read the Bill, and I will come on to further measures that we are proposing.

If we believe that every child deserves the best, that every classroom deserves a top teacher, and that every state school must be a great school, we cannot have excellence for some children and “just fine” or “okay” for the rest. We need all schools, working together, to deliver a national, high-quality core offer for all children, and to have the flexibility to innovate beyond that, so that parents know that wherever they live and whatever their local school, this Government are their child's greatest champion. The best schools and trusts do incredible work, day in, day out, and I pay tribute to them. They are engines of innovation and civic leaders, and collaboration and improvement are central to their success. They prove that excellence already exists in the system, and it is time to spread it to all schools.

That does not mean no competition. Competition can be healthy and a spur to excellence, but competition that encourages schools to hoard best practice or to export problems to others must be replaced by collaboration,

and by schools working together to solve problems and put children first. I do not just mean collaboration within trusts. True collaboration also looks outward, so that there are schools driven by a shared purpose embedded in communities. Our vision twins that deep collaboration with healthy competition, so that every child in every school can benefit from best practice.

The Bill brings reform. It demands high and rising standards across the board. We will restore the principle established by the noble Lord Baker, which is that every child will benefit from the same core national curriculum, following the curriculum and assessment review. The national curriculum was a Conservative achievement—I benefited from it—and this Labour Government will bring that legacy back for every child, giving every parent the confidence in standards that they deserve. Every child will be taught by an excellent, qualified teacher who has undertaken statutory induction. That will be supported by giving every school the flexibility to create attractive pay and condition offers to recruit and retain excellent teachers, and by backing those schools already doing that to keep it going.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I agree, as would all Members, that we want excellent standards for all schools. One idea that the Conservative Government had was that if a school was failing, new management would go in to increase standards, yet the Secretary of State wants to dismantle that. I would call that vandalism of our education system.

Bridget Phillipson: No; I invite the right hon. Lady to look carefully at the measures in the Bill. We will not hesitate to intervene in failing schools—indeed, we will intervene a lot sooner than the Conservatives did in schools that are coasting. Those schools that fall short of the statutory level of intervention will see regional improvement teams in their schools driving up standards.

Where there is failure in the system, or where schools are not delivering the standards that every child deserves, we will act. That action will always be guided by what is best for the children in those schools. That may well be academisation, or it may be targeted intervention to drive change in practice and drive up standards, rather than to change the structure. The Bill will convert the duty to issue academy orders into the power to better deliver high and rising standards for all children, strengthening the range of ways through which failure can be tackled. There can be no excuse for fixating on structures and not on standards, because what matters is what works.

The Bill ends the presumption that new schools should be academies, giving local authorities the freedom to deliver the schools that their communities need. That includes the ability to open new special schools—something that Members across the House know is a major challenge. This Government will work tirelessly to make sure that all children with special educational needs and disabilities receive the support they need to achieve and thrive. The previous Government left that in the “too difficult” box, but we will tackle it and ensure that all our children get a great education.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): The Secretary of State mentions special schools, and Members across the Chamber will have postbags filled with letters about far

too many children who are not getting the support they need with their mental health, whether at special schools or otherwise. Will she consider putting a mental health professional in all our schools, including special schools, so that our children's wellbeing can be improved, including their mental health?

Bridget Phillipson: I share the hon. Lady's concern about the mental health challenges that many of our young people are experiencing, and we are committed to rolling out mental health support right across our schools. On the wider challenge of support for children with special educational needs and disabilities, I wish to make clear to the House that the reform we must engage in, and the change required, is complex and will take time. I invite Members across the House—the Liberal Democrats and others—to work with us on the change that is required to get this right, because for far too long children with special educational needs and disabilities have been failed by this system. Parents have lost trust and confidence in it, and it is bankrupting local councils.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): My right hon. Friend has spoken about academies and various other forms of schools. Will she confirm that nothing in the Bill would result in a teacher in any school getting a pay cut?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend brings a wealth of experience as a teacher to the House. I know that teachers will want to hear what this will mean for their pay, so I reiterate that the measures in the Bill and the changes that we will bring forward to the schoolteachers' pay and condition documents in the following remit will not cut teachers' pay.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): The Secretary of State has spoken about her focus on standards. The free schools programme has driven up standards across the country, so why was one of her first actions to threaten 44 free school projects developed by parents, pupils and communities? Will she lift the veil of uncertainty over them?

Bridget Phillipson: We are looking carefully at all the schools in the pipeline, but we need to ensure that in every case there is a strong case for the need for the school and good value for the taxpayer. We have inherited an enormous challenge when it comes to the public finances, and we have had to make difficult decisions because of the £22 billion black hole that the hon. Member and his party left behind. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), who is chuntering away, was in Cabinet as Chief Secretary to the Treasury and responsible for overseeing all of that.

Returning to support for children with special educational needs and disabilities, we will improve inclusivity in mainstream schools while ensuring that specialist provision can cater for those with the most complex needs.

The changes that the Bill brings are underpinned by our wider reforms to drive improvement. New school report cards will give a full picture of a school's performance. New RISE—regional improvement for standards and excellence—teams will draw on the excellence in our system and bring schools together to spread good practice and challenge underperformance. Accountability and

[Bridget Phillipson]

inspection should be a galvanising force for improvement and a catalyst for quality, raising the floor of success, not lowering the ceiling of ambition. It should not drag schools down but lift children up. It is about them—it is always about them.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's speech, and not least for the opportunity to raise standards for children with disability, children experiencing anxiety and children who have got care experience. Will she look at the role that local authorities can play in building collaboration and ensure that they have the funding they need? The last Government hollowed them out, yet they have a crucial role in raising standards and supporting schools.

Bridget Phillipson: I agree with my hon. Friend that we need to ensure that local authorities are working with schools, health services and other partners in their areas. Through the last Budget, we were able to deliver additional investment for our local councils. We want to see a much greater focus and priority on early help and early support and prevention, because we know that that is where we can make the biggest difference to children's lives.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Bridget Phillipson: I will give way a final time and then conclude.

Richard Tice: I was chair of governors of the 15th academy, and in 2008 I welcomed Sir Tony Blair to that academy in Northampton to show him the benefits of the freedoms for governors to act with regard to the national curriculum, with regard to pay and conditions, and with regard to innovation. I think that Sir Tony Blair and Lord Adonis will be horrified by these changes, which will restrict the freedoms to innovate and to improve. It is a great shame.

Bridget Phillipson: That is a total misunderstanding of the Bill. The hon. Gentleman should not seek to speak for others in this regard. We are restoring academies to their core intended purpose of driving up standards for the most disadvantaged children in our country, with innovation spread wherever we can do that.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): I really welcome the measures in the Bill to ensure that the many children being home-schooled have all the support they need to get back into mainstream education. I was extremely concerned to find out that in the last academic year, 800 children in Hastings were being home-schooled—that is one in 16 children, or 27 classrooms of children. While there will be parents providing a good-quality education at home, I know from speaking to teachers and to local shops who see these children in their establishments that some are not necessarily getting a good education. We need to get those children back into school.

Bridget Phillipson: I agree with my hon. Friend. I recognise the challenge that she faces in her constituency and that we see right across our country. We have seen a big increase in the number of children being home-educated.

While I respect the right of parents to make that choice—there is a complex range of reasons why many parents are now making that decision, and there are questions about how we support our children with their mental health and wider challenges on the SEND system—let me be absolutely clear to the House that all children not in school, when they are being home-educated, must have a good level of education. We cannot allow the situation to continue where we do not have visibility of where children are and they slip between the cracks. We will ensure through the Bill that when a child protection investigation is under way or there is a child protection plan, local authorities will be able to decline that request from parents, because we all sadly know what can go terribly wrong when we fail to step in and protect children.

Graham Stuart: On that issue, will the Secretary of State give way?

Bridget Phillipson: I am afraid that I am concluding now.

We are bringing together the system's many parts into a collaborative, coherent whole with children at its heart. Our ambition to support children does not stop here. We expect to bring forward further legislation when parliamentary time allows. Our work to erase the stain of child poverty must and will continue through the child poverty taskforce, which I am proud to co-chair with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.

Reducing the burden on schools, freeing teachers to teach and children to learn—today is about action. When colleagues from across the House read the Bill in all its detail, they will find running through its 60 clauses one golden thread, one common theme, one objective, one common cause. It is not structures or ideology, and they will find no pet projects or stale dogma. They will see that our focus is firmly on children: their life chances are the aim, their protection is the objective and their success is our common cause. This Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill is written for them. It is introduced to the House for them. It will be implemented for them—for their safety, for their schooling and for their futures. I commend the Bill to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

1.26 pm

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from "That" to the end of the Question and add:

"this House, while welcoming measures to improve child protection and safeguarding, declines to give a Second Reading to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill because it undermines the long-standing combination of school freedom and accountability that has led to educational standards rising in England, effectively abolishes academy freedoms which have been integral to that success and is regressive in approach, leading to worse outcomes for pupils; because it ends freedom over teacher pay and conditions, making it harder to attract and retain good teachers; because it ends freedom over Qualified Teacher Status, making teacher recruitment harder; because it removes school freedoms over the curriculum, leading to less innovation; because repealing the requirements for failing schools to become academies and for all new schools to be academies will undermine school improvement and remove the competition which has led to rising standards; because the Bill will make it harder for good schools to expand, reducing parental choice and access to a good education; and

calls upon the Government to develop new legislative proposals for children's wellbeing including establishing a national statutory inquiry into historical child sexual exploitation, focused on grooming gangs."

The Bill in front of us today is a Bill of two halves, one of which seeks to protect children and improve safeguarding and support for children in care. While the Opposition will seek to amend various aspects of what is being put forward in Committee, we do see value in it. But the other half of the Bill is the policy equivalent of a wrecking ball. It is an all-out assault on teachers, the education system and standards. It is nothing less than education vandalism and we will oppose it with every fibre of our beings.

The House must be in no doubt that the Bill really matters. It destroys the consensus built over two decades in England on how to improve schools—a consensus that has led to English children being the best in the western world at reading and maths. I cannot understand why the Government would seek to reverse that progress. What are they hoping to achieve? It seems to be policy built purely on ideology. More than that, it is wrong. I desperately hope that Government Members will come to see that.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you would think that a Labour Government would feel proud of the record they had on education under Blair. It was that Labour Government who innovated and made way for academies. When Blair talks about academies, he says that an academy

"belongs not to some remote bureaucracy, not to the rulers of government, local or national, but to itself, for itself. The school is in charge of its own destiny."

That Blairite principle—a school in charge of its own destiny—was built on and expanded by subsequent Conservative Governments. What has been the result of this largely cross-party consensus? A thriving education system in which English children have soared up the programme for international student assessment rankings.

I see before me a move away from all the things that have enabled that success. The Bill seeks to turn its back on Labour's history and take back those academy freedoms on curriculum, on pay and on behaviour. You name it, they are reversing it—all the things that have done so much to improve our education system. Step by step, the very policies that saw our schools rise up the international league tables are being reversed. I guarantee that just as we went up, as a result of the Bill we will come down those very same rankings. And who will suffer? The poorest pupils in society.

Dame Meg Hillier: I have lived the dream of the academy programme from the very beginning under London Challenge, and I have seen Hackney children go to university—they did not when I was first elected. But the last Government brought in a wrecking ball. They made a smorgasbord of free schools, and offered an open chequebook to pay over the odds for inadequate sites that children were condemned to for years, with no accountability in the system as each bit fractured away. The reason why standards have notionally gone up is that some schools went 11 years without an inspection after they were rated were outstanding, but they were far from outstanding when they were next inspected. The right hon. Lady needs to take responsibility and

accountability for what her Government did, and applaud the Secretary of State for what she is trying to do to put it right.

Laura Trott: I have a huge amount of respect for the hon. Lady, but she will know that the academy programme was expanded more than 50 times under the last Government, and we went up the education rankings, not down, under the previous Government.

The Bill would abolish academies in all but name, and for what? Because Education Ministers think that they know better than Katharine Birbalsingh and Sir Jon Coles. Blair said in 2005 that

"command public services today are no more acceptable than a command economy."

Well, someone needs to tell the Education Secretary, because that is exactly what she is proposing in the Bill. It is anti-rigour, anti-choice and anti-accountability.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): One of the most impressive aspects of the previous Government was the work instituted by Michael Gove to build on the reforms of Tony Blair, and carried on by successive Secretaries of State, such as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds). Will my right hon. Friend commit the next Conservative Government to reversing these changes and ensuring that we have more choice for headteachers on curriculum, hiring and firing and expulsions so that we bring competition to the schools sector, not the dead hand of a Whitehall bureaucrat?

Laura Trott: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. To be clear, the Bill proposes a pay cut for nearly 20,000 teachers in future years, because it imposes national terms and conditions on teachers in academies. I have to ask: what problem are the Government trying to solve? Teachers outside of national pay scales are paid more, not less. What have they got against highly paid teachers? Why on earth are the Government coming here today and telling tens of thousands of teachers that their pay is too high? It is absurd. Levelling down seems to be this Government's priority. The flexibilities given on terms and conditions allow academies to offer things such as a longer school day. Are the Labour Government proposing to ban that?

The explanatory notes to the Bill set a new standard in double speak when they praise the

"positive innovation and good practice in teachers' pay and conditions in some academies"

and say that the Government want to

"ensure that local authority-maintained schools also have the opportunity to implement this".

So what are they doing? Are they giving these same pay flexibilities to local authority schools? They are doing opposite. They are taking pay flexibilities away from academies. Do not try and make any sense of this, because it is impossible. It is entirely contradictory.

The Government are also removing the requirement for failing schools to be taken over by an academy, despite recognising the

"strong track record of multi academy trusts...turning around failing schools".

What are they replacing it with? They mention

"regional improvement for standards and excellence ('RISE') teams"—

[*Laura Trott*]

officials sitting in the Department for Education—but in another breath they said that those teams will not be involved in failing schools.

The Government have clearly totally failed; they do not understand that the reason that failing schools became academies by default is that it is the most effective intervention. If it is not mandatory, there will be lots of massive rows about what will happen to failing schools, and inevitable delays and legal challenges. What is the upshot? More time with children in failing schools not being dealt with. What is their plan for failing schools? What is their plan to protect those children from falling behind? What is the evidence that this approach is better? Have they trialled it anywhere? Why on earth are they putting this into a Bill without a clear alternative failure regime in place that evidence shows is at least as good?

The Bill is totally unacceptable and misunderstands why the academy order has been so important. I cannot say this strongly enough to the Government Benches: it needs to change.

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): Will the right hon. Lady concede that the academisation process has meant that the off-rolling that we have seen up and down this country has led to the crisis in SEND? That is the whole point of how the academy system has, apparently, improved standards. It has not—it has decreased inclusion. Will she please show us how the academy system has helped our children who are now stuck at home because they have been off-rolled?

Laura Trott: I am glad that the hon. Lady has confirmed that the Labour party is, indeed, anti-academy.

The Bill goes on and on—rampant centralisation in search of a cause. Why are the Government making all schools follow the national curriculum? Where is the evidence that there is a problem? Why are they putting in place sweeping powers to direct academies on unspecified things? What possible justification do they have for that? The notes say that it is to prevent “unreasonable use of power”. I say, look in the mirror.

Graham Stuart: My right hon. Friend has mentioned pay and power. I think they lie behind the Bill, because the education unions opposed at every step under the last Labour Government and under the last Conservative Government. The dinosaur tendency, which we just heard from the hon. Member for Gravesham (Dr Sullivan), shows that the Government viscerally dislike the freedom of academies, and they turn their face against the transformation of educational outcomes—not least for the poorest—because of ideology rather than a genuine commitment to the child.

Laura Trott: Sadly, I think my right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. I see no other reason for the academy provisions to be in the Bill. It actually says in the explanatory notes that the primary aim of this legislation is to make the education system “more consistent”. That is at the heart of the problem today, because more consistency does not a better education system make. It is a classic Labour argument: one size must fit all, lopping the tops off the tallest poppies.

God forbid that schools might be able to innovate and learn from each other, and teachers might have freedoms in the classroom to try new things, backed up by a regulator that rigorously inspects and identifies failure. That is an excellent education system, but one that aims solely for consistency is not—a system of command and control, stifling teachers, suppressing innovation, with everything decided in an office in Whitehall, far away from the classrooms. It is same old Labour: consistency for all, excellence for none.

Mrs Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): The right hon. Lady has referred repeatedly to command, control and consistency, as if the latter were a problem. Presumably, she was part of the Government that sought to use academies as a mechanism by which to control individual schools from Whitehall, rather than having the individual involvement of local authorities.

Laura Trott: The whole point of academies is to drive up standards by freeing them from state control. The Bill undermines all that, which is why it would abolish academies in all but name. I urge Government Members to look at what the education part of the Bill would do. Look at the Labour history under Education Secretaries such as Lord Adonis. Do not destroy something that the Labour party helped to build.

The Government must get rid of the academy elements of the Bill. They will not improve the school system; they will make it worse. Do not destroy the work and policy of two decades at the stroke of a bureaucrat's pen. We must ask ourselves: who this is all about? Are we on the side of ideology, unions and bureaucrats, or are we on the side of the children and teachers, and making sure that the most disadvantaged get the best possible education? If it is the latter, the education section of the Bill must go.

Let me come to the final part of our amendment, on a national grooming gang inquiry. This debate has been taken too far away from the victims and what is right for them. There are legitimate arguments to be had in this area, but the one I will not accept is that to call for an inquiry is to be far right. The Labour Government have to understand that they must explain their actions, not just call the Opposition names. Local inquiries, which the Labour Government say are the answer, do not have legal powers to summon witnesses, take evidence under oath, or requisition evidence. Some of the leaders of the Manchester inquiry resigned after they said that they were blocked from accessing information.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I commend the shadow Minister for this amendment, and for the last part in particular. As everybody in this Chamber probably knows, my politics are very much left of centre, but I fully support what the Conservative party is doing with this amendment, and my party will also be supporting the Conservatives on it. The reason is quite simple: the women and children who have faced injustice over the decades deserve to see the grossly perverted perpetrators who carried out unbelievable things against children over the years face justice. We seek justice for them. The Conservative party seeks justice for them. The amendment the Conservatives have put forward today encapsulates the feeling of not just this House, but this nation.

Laura Trott: I am enormously grateful for the hon. Gentleman's support, and I agree completely. This is an enormous scandal, and yet we do not fully know the number of victims or perpetrators, or where it has taken place.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I hope that the right hon. Lady and Opposition Members will reflect that what we have seen recently is a case study in disinformation turbocharged by social media, including personal smears. Today is the latest example of how those who flirt with populism misuse sensitive and important issues. It is exemplified by how the shadow Minister and other Conservative Members are willing to wreck a Bill that is actually about improving children's wellbeing. She should reflect on how they chase headlines and jump on bandwagons, while my right hon. Friends on the Front Bench take action after years of inertia.

Laura Trott: I have been very clear today that the Bill will destroy the education system in this country and reverse the progress that we have made, and that is why we oppose it.

On the hon. Gentleman's broader point, I condemn the language that has been used against hon. Members in this House. However, he will recall that the Labour party put out a social media graphic that greyed out the then Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), and claimed that he said that paedophiles should not go to prison. It is incumbent on all of us in this House to be moderate in our language.

This is an enormous scandal, and yet we do not fully know the number of victims or perpetrators, or where it has taken place. The previous Conservative Government set up the grooming gangs taskforce, which made more than 500 arrests in the first year. With 1,400 victims in Rotherham alone, this will potentially encompass tens of thousands of children. We therefore need a comprehensive national inquiry into grooming gangs to tell the truth.

Esther McVey: Just for clarification, should Government Members do the right thing tonight and vote for our amendment, there would be no wrecking of any Bill—they just need to vote the right way.

Laura Trott: As ever, my right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. There is no reason that action cannot be taken at the same time as a national inquiry—it is not an either/or. If the Government want to disagree with that, they will have to argue their case on the facts, and not simply smear any opposition to them as far right or say that parliamentary procedure means it cannot happen.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Laura Trott: No, I am going to finish. This is an opportunity for MPs across the House to give victims the justice they deserve. Hon. Members have heard our arguments on the inquiry and on schools. I hope that today, when we vote on our reasoned amendment, the Government see sense on both.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Education Committee.

1.43 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Our education system and the wider network of services that support children and families offer unparalleled opportunities to make a critical difference to the life chances of the next generation. If Governments get the policy framework right, they can support every child to thrive in their education, close the disadvantage gap and lay the foundations for good mental health and wellbeing, which will set a child up for life. However, the situation that this Government inherited in July was overall very far from that.

There are, of course, many schools, teachers and other professionals who work with children and young people who are doing an exceptional job and achieving good results. As we consider this important legislation, I want to pay tribute to everyone who works to give our children and young people the best possible start in life—a great education, support where they need it and access to opportunities—and those who do the very difficult work of keeping the most vulnerable children safe. The challenges in our system are not down to them; they are the consequence of layer upon layer of policy decisions taken since 2010 that have made the context in which they work immeasurably harder.

I shall mention just a few of those policy decisions. The decision to cut the funding for early help and support for families, resulting in the closure of 1,300 Sure Start centres, stripped away vital support that can prevent families from reaching a crisis. While funding for early help and support has reduced, expenditure on child protection and on children in the care system in crisis situations that can often be prevented has gone up.

The decision to make academy schools directly accountable to the Secretary of State and responsible for their own admissions policies, and to make free schools the main delivery method for new schools, has left local authorities, which retain the statutory duty for providing a school place for every child who needs one and for SEND provision, without the tools and levers to deliver them, creating an unaccountable and unmanageable wild west of admissions in many areas. The neglect of the SEND system has allowed it to reach breaking point, and children are routinely let down; the capacity of schools to meet their needs has been eroded, and there is a lack of accountability for the role of health services. Local authorities are being pushed to the edge of effective bankruptcy; school attendance has been falling at a completely unacceptable rate; and our children and young people have the worst mental health and wellbeing in Europe.

Where we should have a system of many parts all working together in the best interests of children and families, we have a broken system where some parts are missing entirely and others are buckling under the pressure. Far too many children—particularly those with SEND—are being let down. In too many cases, either children are not protected from harm as they should be, or the outcomes of the attempts of the system to protect them are shamefully poor. We need only to look at the shocking over-representation of care-experienced people who are homeless or in the criminal justice system to know that our systems are failing. We need only to reflect on the names of the children who have been tragically killed at the hands of those who should have protected and nurtured them—Star

[Helen Hayes]

Hobson, Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Sara Sharif, among others—to know that child protection urgently needs to be strengthened.

I welcome the Bill, which begins the work of stitching back together a support system for children and families and places children once again at the heart of Government policy. Measures such as the creation of a single child identifier and a register of children not in school, restoring the ability of local authorities to deliver new school places and intervene on admissions, tackling profiteering by providers of children's homes, delivering free breakfast clubs, reducing costs of uniforms and many other measures in the Bill will make a big difference to children and their families.

The Education Committee is taking a close interest in this legislation, which is relevant to our ongoing inquiries on children's social care, SEND and many other aspects of our work, and there are a number of areas on which I would like to press Ministers today. The measures to improve children's social care are welcome, but it is well established that local authorities face huge cost pressures, which means that the system does not function as well as it should. Local authorities that are currently trapped in a cycle of spot-purchasing residential places for looked-after children from expensive out-of-area providers will need support and funding to make the transition to more positive ways of working, even if those new ways of working can bring down costs in the longer term. What investments will the Government make in children's social care to ensure that the changes in the Bill can be fully delivered with the maximum impact?

The £30 million of funding for breakfast clubs provided in the autumn Budget will extend the existing breakfast club scheme from around 2,700 schools to around 3,450 schools, but there are more than 16,700 state-funded primary schools in the UK. Can I therefore press the Government on the need to set out the costs and funding for delivering this policy in every primary school, and for a clear timescale for doing so?

Parents of children with SEND often find it hardest to find childcare for their children. Many have expressed concern at a clause in the Bill that will allow for exemptions from the requirement to provide breakfast clubs for disabled children. Some disabled children will also be able to access a breakfast club only if they have home-to-school transport to arrive at school earlier. Will Ministers confirm that the Bill will ensure equal access to breakfast clubs for children with SEND in mainstream and specialist settings, with support where needed to enable children to attend them?

Breakfast clubs ensure that no child has to start the school day hungry, which will be transformative. However, school lunches also really matter, as the most effective way to ensure access to a nutritious hot meal for the most disadvantaged children. Will Ministers therefore consider whether auto-enrolment of children already eligible for free school meals can be incorporated into the Bill? As a minimum, we should ensure that all children who are currently eligible receive a free school lunch.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): The hon. Lady mentions school breakfast. Child obesity is up by a third and diabetes is up by a fifth. Does she

agree that, while free breakfast clubs are a great opportunity to ensure children are fed, we must also ensure that school meals are healthy and nutritious; and that, alongside the Bill, school food standards need to be updated in line with the most recent nutritional advice, making it clear that they apply to breakfast?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We have a very long speaking list, so interventions must be short.

Helen Hayes: I agree with the hon. Lady that school food, in whichever setting it is delivered, should be of the highest quality. She will know about the pressures on school budgets. My constituency has experienced among the highest drops in funding for local schools of anywhere in the country. That has eroded the money that schools have to spend on high-quality food. I know that that is one of the areas on which those on the Government Front Bench will be anxious to deliver over time as public finances permit.

The measures to support care leavers are welcome, but are limited to extended Staying Close support and requiring local authorities to publish the details of their offer. What further measures does the Minister intend to take to improve outcomes for care leavers and to ensure they get the same opportunities as their peers? Only 14% of care leavers go to university compared with 46% of non-care-experienced young people. What further measures will the Government take to support care leavers to access and stay in higher education? Why are the Government not proposing a national offer for care leavers to address the postcode lottery in care, in particular to provide care leavers with the confidence that if they choose to attend university away from home, because that is the best option for them, the same support will be available to them wherever they study?

The policies and practices of other Departments also have a profound effect on the experience of care leavers. Can the Minister confirm whether, outside of the Bill, the Government are still considering the expansion of corporate parenting duties, so that every part of the state is required to take seriously its duty to looked-after children and care-experienced people?

Finally, to deliver on the commitments in the Bill, those who work with children and families will need support. There are challenges in recruitment and retention across many of the professions, from social work to teaching to the early years. Will the Government set out a workforce strategy to ensure that training places, continuing professional development and effective recruitment strategies are in place to secure the staff we need to deliver the transformation our children deserve? The Bill will introduce a series of measures that will start the process of rebuilding support for children and their families, and that is very welcome. My Committee will continue to take an interest in the detail of the Bill and seek to ensure that it is as effective as it can be in delivering a system that can support every child to thrive, and in contributing to the debate about the further steps, beyond the scope of the Bill, that will also be needed.

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

1.53 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): After five years in this place, I am relieved and delighted that I and other hon. Members finally have the chance to consider a piece of legislation that focuses on children. The Bill gets to the heart of our shared duty as public representatives to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our children. The Liberal Democrats will approach the Bill in a spirit of constructive co-operation. I urge colleagues across the House to do the same for the sake of our children up and down the country.

On that particular note, I turn to the reasoned amendment tabled in the name of the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch). Everyone in this House agrees that no child should ever face sexual abuse and exploitation. We all agree that the state must comprehensively investigate all allegations. We must deliver justice and prevent these sickening acts from happening again in future. Where we disagree is on how to achieve that. We on the Liberal Democrat Benches want action that helps victims and prevents these crimes from happening again. The Conservative party wants to derail this important Bill instead. We will table amendments ensuring the recommendations of the Jay inquiry are implemented in full. We will be a party of constructive opposition and we will aim to strengthen the Bill and its crucial measures on child protection and safeguarding. For that reason, we cannot accept the Opposition's wrecking amendment. Our children's safety and wellbeing is simply far too important. We owe it to them all to get this right.

Graham Stuart: Can the hon. Lady set out exactly in what way the amendment, which I think is entirely constructive—it accepts the safeguarding element, but challenges the educational vandalism that is being undertaken by the Government—is so objectionable?

Munira Wilson: I humbly say to the right hon. Gentleman, who has been in this place much longer than I have, that I understand that if the reasoned amendment were passed, the Bill would fall. That is why it is not a constructive amendment. That is why it is a wrecking amendment. I do not think killing a Bill that seeks to improve safeguards and safety for our children is the way to get justice for innocent victims of sexual abuse.

There is much in the Bill that we on the Liberal Democrat Benches welcome, but of course there are areas of detail where we will seek to probe and strengthen, and measures on which we will seek to go further. As the Bill makes its way through the House, we will provide that detailed scrutiny, challenge and improvement.

Some important changes are in the provisions on kinship care. The Secretary of State will be aware that this is a subject close to my heart and those of my party colleagues.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): It is an issue close to my heart as well, as I moved into the care of my grandparents as a young teenager. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is crucial we get this absolutely right first time, because it is such a rare opportunity to address kinship care? Ministers should

keep listening to kinship organisations to fill in the gaps that those organisations see in the Bill, particularly in relation to the definition and to mental health care support.

Munira Wilson: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is absolutely right. I welcome the measures that put information about the local kinship care offer on a statutory footing, recognising the crucial role of kinship carers and finally putting a statutory definition into law, which we have long called for. Yet a definition in and of itself will not provide the financial and practical support that many families and children need. Areas where the Government are taking action are limited to certain sub-groups of kinship carers and their children, thus undermining the value of the proposed definition. The charity Kinship says it would

“hope to see future legislation and the forthcoming multi-year spending review further prioritise wider kinship care reform”.

I therefore ask the Secretary of State, and will ask the Minister during the progress of the Bill, when they plan to expand the current pilot scheme to provide allowances to all kinship carers. Why does the educational support in the Bill not seek to extend pupil premium plus and priority admissions for children in kinship care?

We welcome the Bill's provisions on child safeguarding, including the register of children not in school. As Liberals, our party firmly upholds the right of parents to educate their children at home when it is the best choice for their child. In 99% of cases a parent knows what is best for their child, but it is deeply concerning that there may be many thousands of children whose whereabouts are simply unknown. That reality can contribute, as we have seen all too recently, to tragic safeguarding failures, and that cannot continue.

Graham Stuart: Can the hon. Lady provide a single instance where a child who was in home education—we must remember that children at school spend about 86% of their time out of school—who was at harm was not known to social services already? Too easily there is a conflation of a failure of social services, which needs to be fixed, with home education, which is entirely separate.

Munira Wilson: All the evidence points to the fact that the education and schools sector must be a key safeguarding partner, which is why it is in the Bill. When a child has been identified as being at risk, ensuring that they are in school, which the Bill seeks to do, will help to safeguard them. We saw this all too tragically in the recent case of Sara Sharif: she was taken out of school and then abused at home, and tragically died.

Graham Stuart: She was being abused anyway.

Munira Wilson: The point is that this is just an additional measure to ensure that children like her are safe.

I want to reiterate to colleagues across the House that we absolutely support and champion the right of parents to home-educate. This is not an attack on home education; it is about ensuring that all children are safe. That is the view of the Children's Commissioner, the National Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Children and many other organisations, and in fact parties across the House.

[Munira Wilson]

The Conservatives themselves started to legislate for this in the last Parliament but then binned the provision. There is cross-party consensus on this measure.

There are areas of detail that we need to dig into during the Bill's progress, but in headline terms, the register is a crucial tool in the armoury that we give local authorities to ensure that our children are safe. As I have said, it has been called for by many organisations and all parties. However, the volume of information requested from parents places a significant and potentially intrusive burden on those who choose to home-educate for the right reasons, so we must ensure that data collection is strictly necessary and proportionate and is being used appropriately.

Clause 24 sets out the cases in which parents and carers must seek permission to withdraw children from school. I would question the inclusion of children placed in special schools. When there are safeguarding concerns about a child, the local authorities should be able to step in to ensure that they receive their education at school. However, some children's needs will not be met in the special schools in which they are placed, and parents may feel that they have no option but to home-educate. In such cases, should not the presumed options be to improve the child's experience of the school or to work with the family to secure alternative provision, rather than using the blunt instrument of clause 24?

We know that, after years of neglect and mismanagement by the Conservatives, our schools are crying out for support. For students, parents and teachers enduring crumbling buildings, persistent underfunding and a spiralling SEND crisis, hearing the Conservatives' rhetoric today will be utterly galling. The Bill takes welcome steps in restoring local authorities' powers to propose new maintained schools—especially given the desperate need in many areas for new special schools, which local authorities have regularly been prevented from establishing in recent years—although, it is disappointing that it does nothing else to start addressing the reforms that are so desperately needed to improve the special educational needs system. We also welcome the co-operation on school admissions criteria. Together, these changes empower communities to allocate educational resources locally, but some clarifications are needed.

Let me ask specifically what assessment the Government have made of the impact of requiring every single teacher to have, or to work towards, qualified teacher status, and whether they have spoken to the sector about that. We all agree that we want qualified teachers in our schools, but there may be some unintended consequences when non-qualified teachers are brought in to run certain services and extracurricular activities. Are the Government confident that this measure will not lead to those unintended consequences?

The provisions on pay should seek only to set a minimum floor, not a maximum ceiling, on what staff can be paid. I take on board what the Secretary of State said in response to an earlier intervention—that no one's pay would be cut—but that is a retrospective reflection. I hope that in future all schools, whether or not they are academies, should be able to pay a premium in order to attract the right staff, if they have the resources to do so. [Interruption.] From a sedentary position, the Conservatives are saying that they will not

be able to do that. In Committee, we will seek to amend the Bill to make it clear that this should be a floor, not a ceiling.

Mrs Sarah Russell: My experience as an employment lawyer is that academy schools generate large amounts of employment rights litigation because they tend not to treat their staff very well. [Interruption.] Some do, of course, but litigation is not in the best interests of children, and ensuring that children have teachers who are adequately paid is a key consideration for Labour Members.

Munira Wilson: I am not in a position to comment on the statistics relating to employment law issues in different types of school. I suspect that whichever type of school we look at, we will find cases across the board, but I am not sure that is up for debate today.

The title of the Bill includes the words “Children's Wellbeing”, but child poverty is the key issue hindering the wellbeing of children in the UK today. The shameful legacy of the Conservative Government is one of far too many children going hungry at school. We Liberal Democrats have put forward a fully costed plan to extend free school meals to the 900,000 children in poverty up to the age of 18 who are currently excluded, and it is disappointing that the Government have not taken this opportunity to ensure that no child goes hungry throughout the school day. A meal at lunch time may be the only hot, nutritious meal that some children get, and all the evidence shows that it helps them to concentrate and learn through the course of the day and achieve better outcomes. We must also bear in mind that hunger does not end at 11. Breakfast clubs can be useful, but expanding lunch provision is a far more ambitious measure, and one that would have a greater impact on child hunger.

As was pointed out by the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), far too many families who are entitled to claim free school meals are not doing so; there are an estimated 470,000 such cases. Not only are those children missing out on the hot meals to which they are entitled, but their schools are missing out on much-needed pupil premium funding.

Chris Vince: I welcome the hon. Lady's comments about the need for young people to have hot food. At Jerounds primary school in my constituency, the kitchen is closed because of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete and the last Government's failure to provide the necessary funds, so none of those children can have hot food. Does the hon. Lady agree that is not good enough?

Munira Wilson: Absolutely, and I am very sorry to hear about that case. The last Government did not deal with RAAC in our school buildings, and it was as a result of work that my colleagues and I did, along with Labour Members, to expose some of the shocking extent of it that we finally started to get some traction on the issue.

The Liberal Democrat-led coalition administration in Durham county council introduced auto-enrolment for free school meals in September last year. An extra 2,500 children have been signed up, and there has been an extra £3 million in pupil premium funding for the county. Just imagine the impact that that model could

have nationally. I hope that the Government will take this opportunity to expand free school meals and introduce auto-enrolment.

I was disappointed to see no mention of mental health in a “wellbeing Bill.” This was an opportunity to tackle the mental health crisis that we are seeing among our children, and it is crucial that we do not allow that opportunity to slide away. Given that, on average, six children in every classroom have a mental health condition, the Government could have seized the chance to ensure that every school in the country, whether primary or secondary, has a statutory and fully funded duty to provide a dedicated mental health professional. As the Bill progresses, my Liberal Democrat colleagues and I will seek to do just that, and I am sure that we can count on support from across the House.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): My hon. Friend is making an excellent and balanced case for protecting children. Many children with mental health problems and autism are educated at home because there is no realistic alternative. Does she agree that the Secretary of State should be encouraged to ensure that the support given to home-educating families under clause 25 includes free access to examinations, which can cost hundreds of pounds? Children are struggling to benefit from a good home education because of the cost. Does my hon. Friend support that idea?

Munira Wilson: I am happy to support that. In fact, when the previous Administration introduced the schools Bill, which they then decided to bin, the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords tabled an amendment that did just that, and I am sure that we will seek to do the same this time around to help the families who choose to home-educate.

Although this Bill sets out some important reforms to our schools system, the Liberal Democrats would like to see greater ambition. The attainment gap has widened significantly in recent years, and it is unacceptable that outcomes for less affluent and more vulnerable students are getting worse. We believe that one piece of the puzzle would be a tutoring guarantee for every disadvantaged pupil who needs support. When implemented correctly, tutoring has proved its worth time and again. Seven in 10 parents whose children receive tutoring at school say that it has raised their child's attainment. We know that it also boosts young people's confidence, and tutoring can help tackle persistent absence, which is a huge issue in our schools. I hope the Secretary of State agrees that a tutoring guarantee, introduced via this Bill, would be a powerful tool in narrowing the attainment gap and ensuring that every child gets the high-quality education they deserve.

Let me reiterate that this is a Bill that we must get right. Now is not the time to play politics. Now is the time to work to keep our children safe, to give them the chance to flourish. That is our task across this House, and it is the mission that my party will pursue as the Bill progresses.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I do not wish to set a time limit, so if colleagues keep their contributions nice and short and tight, we can try to get everybody in.

2.10 pm

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): I thank those on the Front Bench for the speed with which they have brought forward the Bill so early in the parliamentary term. As a former teacher and a local authority children's lead, I know how important so many of the measures are—an importance matched only by how overdue so many of them are too—which is why it is such a shame to see others seeking to turn the debate into a political sideshow, when it should really be an opportunity for the House to come together behind some powerful and important safeguarding measures.

As a teacher who saw at first hand the importance of breakfast clubs for delivering the best start to a school day for young people, and as a local authority leader who worked to expand them, I am really excited to see that clause 21 brings forward Labour's commitment to ensure that no child starts school hungry. No one should tolerate children starting school without the food they need to learn and to be ready for their school day, and I am glad that this Government certainly will not do so. Today, however, I want to focus on some of the measures relating to keeping some of the most vulnerable children in society safe and ensuring that they have the support they need. I am particularly pleased to see clause 24, which places on local authorities an obligation to have a register and visibility of every child off the school roll.

As a former local authority lead, I know that reading serious case reviews is an important part of preparation for any role, and certainly for that one. If we read those serious case reviews and stories of what can happen to some of the most vulnerable young people when they are allowed to fall off the radar and to slip through the net, and when they are left open to exploitation and abuse by some of the most evil people in our society, we can be under no illusions as to why this measure is so important. I absolutely understand why, at first reading, those who home-school might have some concerns about it, but this is absolutely not an attack on home-schooling.

The right to home-school is important, certainly at a time when inclusion and support in schools is far from what it should be for children with some of the highest needs, and it is important that that is protected. But just as every parent has the right and responsibility to do what is right for their child, we all have the right and responsibility to ensure that no child can be left vulnerable and fall between the cracks. This Bill does that, and I am incredibly proud to be standing with colleagues and supporting a measure that I know so many of us have called for in a variety of roles over the last decade.

Graham Stuart: Does the hon. Gentleman have sympathy with parents who feel that they have been let down by the local authority on support for their child with special educational needs, who recognise the historical primacy of parents in determining the education of their child, and who are now seeing a piece of legislation that removes that right and says that the state, not the parent, decides whether a child can be taken out of school? We all accept that where there are safeguarding issues, action should be taken, but is the hon. Gentleman really comfortable with changing the approach for the ordinary parent after decades of it being the other way around?

Alistair Strathern: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for one of his many interventions today. I am not sure I heard an apology for the state in which SEND provision was left by the previous Government, but I absolutely recognise the point that I think he is trying to make. If he reads the Bill, however, he will see a lot of assurances. In choosing to set the threshold as high as a section 47 assessment—a child protection assessment under the Children Act 1989—we have been incredibly cautious about where we have drawn the line. Some outside this House might even say we have been too cautious about where we have drawn the line, but it recognises the important balance that has to be struck here, for exactly the reason that the right hon. Gentleman alludes to.

Alongside that, I think colleagues across the House recognise the fact that, for far too long, children's social care has not been doing right by some of the most vulnerable people in our society. At great cost, the system is delivering really poor outcomes for vulnerable young people. It is not providing the love and support that they need, and that love and support does not last anywhere near long enough into their adult life. No parent would expect their responsibilities to end when their child turns 18. I would not tolerate that for my child, and I am sure no one in this Chamber would, yet as a society we all too often do so for those who are in our care. That is why the Bill's requirements around staying put, and around making sure that we have a published care leaver offer, will be so important.

I welcome the Secretary of State's leadership, which has ensured that we have moved at pace, and I look forward to continuing to work with her and with organisations that speak on behalf of care leavers right across the country, to ensure that the Bill's measures are implemented in the most effective and robust way possible. Those in our care would expect nothing less, and I am sure that all of us across the House will make sure that we hold ourselves to a high standard.

Alongside that, it is pretty clear and fair to say that, for far too long, the care system has not recognised the value and importance of wider family networks in delivering the best possible outcomes for vulnerable young people. That is why clause 1, which brings forward the requirement for family group decision making, could be such a powerful tool. If done well, family group decision-making conferences make sure that there is a constellation of family involvement early in a child's case, potentially keeping them out of the care system and making sure that all the people who can exert a positive influence on that child's life can be brought into the process as early as possible. This is a really welcome step forward that could be transformative for the care system. Again, I look forward to working with colleagues from right across the House to make sure that we can implement this measure in the most effective way possible, working with local authorities to deliver all the benefits that family group conferences, if done well, have been shown to have.

Along with many Labour colleagues and Opposition Members who have campaigned on behalf of kinship carers many times in my quite short parliamentary career, I am glad to see the important recognition of their role in this process. Kinship carers step up for vulnerable young people in their care, and it cannot be right that so many of them are prevented from supporting young people in their care by a rigid and bureaucratic

care system. No kinship carer should have to sign up and become a foster carer just to look after a young person. When they have to do so, it is clear that the system is doing too little to enable what is right. That is why it is so important that the measures in this Bill recognise the importance of kinship care, start to codify it and bring in a local offer, which is welcome.

Alongside that, the important measure to cut down on some of the unnecessary costs in the system—whether they are due to hiring agency workers or to excessive profiteering by children's homes—has to be welcomed too. We must make sure that every penny of the money we rightly spend on children's services can go towards protecting and looking after vulnerable young people.

There is so much else to welcome in this Bill, which I am sure a great many colleagues will touch on. There is definitely more to do, from tackling the crisis that we inherited in SEND provision to making sure that we have the foster carers we need to support our young people. There will be more important work for this Government to do, and I have absolutely no doubt that my Front-Bench colleagues will show great leadership on those issues over the months to come.

Today is about action and doing what is right for some of the most vulnerable young people in our society. It is about bringing forward measures that could have come before this House a long time ago, but it has taken this Government, this Minister and this Education Secretary to finally show leadership. I am incredibly proud to be supporting them today, and I am very happy to be standing on this side of the argument in the Chamber.

2.18 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I am sure that today Labour MPs will cheer what they see as the final demise of the Gove-Gibb reforms, but the Bill before us reverses far further back than that. If this Bill passes in anything close to its current form, it will be as if Lord Adonis was never the Schools Minister and Lord Blunkett had never sat in the Secretary of State's place. It will be as if Tony Blair had never been Prime Minister, and had never made central to his pledge to the British people in 1997 those famous three words: "Education, education, education."

To be clear, there are things in this Bill that we agree with. There are things that were in our Bill. There are things that build on the work that we were doing on Staying Close, on virtual school heads, on kinship care and more. Of course, there are also things in the Bill that are designed to be eye-catching initiatives—something that the Government learned from New Labour—such as the retail offer, to use the jargon, on breakfast clubs. There are already thousands of breakfast clubs in our country. By the way, we would like to know what will happen to breakfast clubs at secondary school, where they would make more of an impact on attendance than in primary school. There are also the provisions on uniform. We have had statutory guidance on uniform for a long time, so I have no idea why it is necessary to write it into law. The principal aim seems to be to outlaw primary schools requiring the wearing of a tie. The biggest part of this Bill—read the detail—is about attacking school and trust autonomy and giving power back to Whitehall and the local education authority.

Colleagues on both sides of the House know there has been a dramatic transformation in educational attainment in this country. We now have the best primary school readers in the western world, and we have seen dramatic improvements in secondary school maths, reading and science. Children eligible for free school meals are now 50% more likely to go to university than they were in 2010. Why has that happened? In one word: teachers. It is teachers who have made that happen. But there are also brilliant, dedicated teachers in Wales and Scotland, where those improvements have not happened. The most effective teachers exist in an ecosystem, and what has really created the potential for these improvements is that brilliant teachers have been supported by our reforms.

Those reforms have always had two sides. First, there has been a relentless focus on standards and quality, with a knowledge-rich curriculum and proven methods such as synthetic phonics and maths mastery. Schools have been learning from schools, with a hub system across the country and, critically, within academy trusts, which are the key vehicle for school improvement.

We have always known that this focus has to go hand in hand with diversity and choice. Parents must be able to select what is best for their children, and we believe there is a role for big schools, small schools, co-ed schools, mixed schools, denominational schools and so on. Of course, academies and free schools have enabled that diversity to increase further.

To have effective school choice, there has to be capacity in the system. There have to be more places than there are children, which is why we have added more than 1 million new places since 2010, following the Labour party's unbelievable decision to cut 100,000 places in its last years in government.

Finally, to have diversity and choice, parents need clear information. The key Progress 8 metric is so much better than what came before, the five-plus C-plus at GCSE measure or contextual value added. Combined with clear Ofsted judgments, this has enabled parents to understand quickly and easily what is going on in different schools.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I could make some points about Progress 8, but that is not why I am intervening.

Just yesterday, my local news website reported that Dr Brown, the award-winning founding headteacher of the award-winning Maple Hayes Hall school for dyslexia in Lichfield, used his 90th birthday message to say that the obsessive focus on synthetic phonics is holding back pupils. That is not me saying that; it comes from the award-winning headteacher of an award-winning school.

Damian Hinds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for letting the House know that the new Labour party still rejects synthetic phonics, which has the most remarkable depth of evidence behind it, in favour of its fashionable, progressive policies. This is why I say that all the progress achieved by our reforms is at imminent risk. Labour has already stopped new free schools, and now there will be far fewer academy conversions. Even existing academies are about to see their freedoms eroded.

What is the practical benefit of all these erosions? Take the qualified teacher status requirement. Schools are not going around en masse recruiting teachers without

qualifications, but there can be times when it is right for a school to employ a teacher from the independent sector or another country. What will this requirement achieve?

Or take the statutory pay and conditions framework. I know of no evidence that academy groups are undercutting pay and conditions—if any Labour Member does, they should please intervene. Some academy groups pay more, and what does that mean? It means they are investing.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman needs to understand that it is about pay and conditions, not just pay, and it needs to be national if we are to recruit and retain teachers. The previous Government failed on every single measure to retain and recruit qualified teachers.

Damian Hinds: I am grateful to Labour colleagues for their interventions, and for telling this House and the country what they need to know. All these successful schools and trusts have been doing exactly that. They have brought new talent into the profession, and they have helped to improve retention, but no, they are not the right people to make that decision, are they? No, Labour MPs and Labour Ministers should be making that decision for them.

The vast majority of schools follow the national curriculum, but some innovate. What is wrong with that? What is wrong with adding something on top of the national curriculum? In any case, every school is statutorily required to deliver a balanced and broadly focused curriculum, and they are checked on that by Ofsted.

Finally, there is the power for councils to prevent good, popular schools from expanding. What could that possibly achieve, except creating more disappointed families, children and parents? The one thing these four measures will achieve is ticking one more union demand.

This Bill cannot be seen in isolation. Look at the Government's broader proposals: scrapping the Latin excellence programme; scrapping the expansion of the cadets programme in state schools; making Ofsted judgments less transparent; and taxing independent sector education for the first time in our country's history, and almost uniquely in the world, in a way that will fill more of the most popular state schools and make it harder for families to get their child into the state school of their choice.

Potentially the biggest thing of all is the curriculum review. This Bill says that schools must follow the national curriculum, before the new national curriculum is set out. It pre-empted the review. We do not know what will be in the review, and we have to keep an open mind and see what comes forward, but I remind colleagues that the Government are not forced to adopt what the independent reviewers come up with, nor are they obliged to stop where the independent reviewers do.

In this country, since the start of the national curriculum, we have always taken the approach of not specifying exactly what kids will learn in sensitive subjects such as history, English literature and religious education. People often misunderstand this, but it is not a list of the things pupils learn in school. Having a broad framework has helped to guard against the politicisation, or the over-politicisation, of education. It would be very dangerous

[*Damian Hinds*]

if, instead, Ministers came up with a more prescriptive approach to the national curriculum, especially if this Bill removes the safety valve of schools being able to deviate somewhat.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I am listening with interest to the right hon. Gentleman's points about the national curriculum, which we know academies currently do not have to follow. I note that 42% of schools across the country no longer enter any pupils for GCSE music, and the figure is 41% for drama and 84% for dance. Does he think that is a factor in this debate?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman should have added the GCSE numbers to the numbers for technical and vocational qualifications, otherwise it is misleading. We all want kids to study the subjects they wish to study, and the subjects from which they will benefit. I am not sure how what the hon. Gentleman says negates what I just said, which is how we normally debate.

The curriculum review is also an assessment review, and we have heard much less about what that means. We know that the Labour party had form on this when it was last in government, with its target-rich—I might say target-obsessed—approach to achieving five or more GCSEs at grade C or above, including English and maths. On the face of it, that is a perfectly good target, but when I was on the Education Committee back in 2012, when it was chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), we had an inquiry on grade inflation. I counted 11 different ways in which the figures were massaged, such that it looked like things were getting better every year but, when the OECD numbers came out, we were tumbling down the international table. It was naive, because what gets measured gets mangled, and I worry that is about to happen all over again. It does children no favours.

Also on international rankings, at the end of Labour's last term in Government, we were the only country in the developed world where the literacy and numeracy of young adults was poorer than that of the generation about to retire. At least in the new Labour era, Labour Members believed they were pursuing academic excellence, but I am afraid that has now gone out of fashion. The progressive phrases we hear from Labour Members sound good—"accessibility", "relevance", "modernity"—but though they are beguiling, those things rarely actually help the children they are thought to help.

The pursuit of true excellence in state education is not elitist. It is the opposite of elitist; it levels the playing field, and it means that people from all backgrounds can be up with those elites. Whatever attacks Labour makes on the independent sector, or to try to take down top-performing state schools, the advantage and the privilege will always lie with children, wherever they are, whose parents are actively involved and engaged. They will always do well. It was not they who needed our reforms—it was everyone else. Under this Bill, it will be everyone else who suffers.

2.31 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): After decades of campaigning for the health of children and better school food, I am so

pleased that universal primary breakfast club provision is being put on a statutory footing in the Bill. There is no greater priority for this Government than raising the healthiest generation of children ever. The fact that the Conservative party is trying to play politics with the wellbeing of children when it comes to this Bill is a true reflection of where its priorities lie.

Providing a free breakfast to all primary school pupils is yet another manifesto commitment fulfilled, and it will transform the lives of children across the country. The Education Endowment Foundation found that school breakfasts can help deliver two months-worth of extra attainment at key stage 1. There will also be huge health outcomes. One in three children are already at risk of future food-related ill health, such as type 2 diabetes or heart disease, by the age of 10. By providing a nutritious breakfast, we can ensure that children start their day at school ready to learn.

However, I am concerned that the Bill does not include any kind of nationwide system of monitoring the food served in breakfast clubs. The school food standards set out over 10 years ago are still not being enforced. Children will be at risk—though it will not necessarily happen—of being served poor-quality breakfasts under the scheme. Alongside the roll-out, we need to put in place the recommendations in the excellent 2013 school food plan about Ofsted and the enforcement of standards. I hope that will be considered in later stages and iterations of the Bill.

Speaking of health outcomes, it is a missed opportunity not to include auto-enrolment for free school meals in the Bill, as others have said today. The Department for Education has reported that nationally, 11% of families who are entitled to claim free school meals have not applied to receive them. That means that 470,000 children in England are missing out on their statutory right to a free school meal. That is due to barriers such as complex application processes, language or literacy challenges, stigma and low awareness. The FixOurFood research programme has worked with 66 local authorities, with huge success, but the burden must be taken off local authorities. Data-sharing challenges should not prevent children from eating the free school meal to which they are entitled.

As the free school meal scheme is a statutory scheme, Government funding for providing those 470,000 children with a school lunch should already exist, so auto-enrolment should not be seen as extra spending. Importantly, auto-enrolment also unlocks vital extra pupil premium funding. For example, since 2016, Sheffield city council has unlocked £3.8 million in extra pupil premium funding every single year to support 5,400 children. That is just one example of many available.

Including provision in the Bill to provide those children with a free lunch would have a very low cost, but an extremely high impact. Free school meals, enabled by the new breakfast programme, have been shown to be beneficial for both attainment and attendance at school. In fact, the case for universal free school meals is also a no-brainer. Impact on Urban Health found that every £1 invested in universal free schools meals returns £1.71 in core benefits. That includes massive savings for the NHS through reduction in childhood obesity rates.

The London Mayor's groundbreaking scheme to expand free school meals to all primary-aged pupils has also had unprecedented impact: 84% of parents said that the

scheme had “helped” or “significantly helped” their household finances. An evaluation report was recently released; I encourage the Minister for School Standards and the Secretary of State to read that report, if they have not done so already. It contains significant findings that more than make the case for universal free school meals to be rolled out.

I look forward to seeing the success of the breakfast club programme as it is rolled out—alongside, hopefully, more quality school lunches. I hope that creates further appetite for better and expanded school food provision in the future.

2.36 pm

Nigel Farage (Clacton) (Reform): I have no doubt that the Bill is based on socialist dogma. It will reduce choice and competition, and take away parents’ freedom to educate at home. I am against it. I will vote against it, and Government Members will vote for it—that is how politics works in this country—but how on earth can we look at the words “Children’s Wellbeing” in the title of the Bill, and debate and vote on that subject, when out there in the country, our constituents are talking about what we used to call grooming gangs, although I think we have moved on to calling them mass and gang rapes?

Since 2012, I have tried to campaign for more truth and honesty about what has gone on, although the former Labour MP for Keighley, Ann Cryer, was doing that as far back as 2002. Every attempt at a proper national debate on the scale of the problem has been shut down. We thought initially that in half a dozen northern towns, there was a serious problem—mass sexual assaults, and rapes of children and young women. However, after recent research, journalist Charlie Peters at GB News says that he is certain that this has taken place in at least 50 towns in our country, and is still going on today.

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): I sincerely thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I appreciate the need to look at these issues in the round, but does he accept that there are measures in the Bill that will protect children, based on what we already know? Those measures will help stop children across the country being abused, and make it harder for groomers to get access to them, which is what we all want, is it not? I hope he agrees with me.

Nigel Farage: No, I do not. Whatever measures are in the Bill to protect children—we all want to see children protected, for goodness’ sake—will not protect them. The Prime Minister is doing his best to tell us that there has been an inquiry: the Jay inquiry. Well, there has, and it is 459 pages long. Grooming gangs are not mentioned once. Rotherham is literally mentioned once, in passing. The scope of that inquiry was like a shotgun: it was to cover a whole range of areas in which children were being abused. What we need, and are calling for, is a rifle-shot inquiry that looks specifically at the question: to what extent were gangs of Pakistani men raping young white girls? Ultimately, it seems to me that there is a deep racist element behind what happened. I might be right or I might be wrong, but does the country not deserve a full, open and national inquiry? I believe there is now overwhelming support on all sides of the political

spectrum for that; Parliament should not be in denial. If the Government will not hold it, we will raise the money at Reform UK and appoint independent arbiters, because we need the truth to be out there.

I will vote for the amendment tabled by the Leader of the Opposition, although I note that as Women and Equalities Minister from 2022 to 2024, she did not meet a single victim of the rapes, and never raised the issue once. Insincere though the amendment may be, we will vote for it. However, I beg Labour Members to think. Do their constituents not need to know the truth about this great evil that has happened in our country?

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We have more than 60 colleagues hoping to get in, so I will implement a five-minute time limit.

2.40 pm

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): Every year, around 500,000 children in this country are abused. That number is likely higher, because the vast majority of abuse is hidden. The Bill is about safeguarding them. It is about stopping vulnerable children from falling through the cracks—for example, by having a register of those who are home-schooled. It is about trying to prevent horrific crimes, such as those committed against Sara Sharif, from ever happening again. The Children’s Charities Coalition has called it “a major step forward”.

I want to be clear that no party has completely clean hands on this issue. Under successive Governments, vulnerable children have been systematically failed by the institutions that were supposed to protect them, such as the police, social services, local authorities, the Crown Prosecution Service and schools. They were disbelieved and their lives were devalued. We in this House owe it to victims and survivors of the past, present and, sadly, future to give them justice and protection where the state failed so badly. If we are to do that, we cannot turn child sexual abuse and exploitation into a political football. I want to be clear that it is by no means all Members on the Opposition Benches who are guilty of doing that; there have been dedicated, powerful advocates for children on both sides of the House.

However, the Conservative leadership, and Reform MPs, marching to the beat of Elon Musk’s drum, are plainly weaponising the pain and trauma of victims for their own political ends. I do not know whether they just do not realise how deeply painful and retraumatising it is for survivors to hear their abuse being spoken about so flippantly, often in graphic terms, by people who profess to care but did not act when they had the power to, just to bolster their unrelated political agenda, or whether they just do not care.

I implore hon. Members on the Opposition Benches to stop. When they say that child sexual abuse and exploitation are the result of alien cultures or a multiculturalism project that has failed, they mask the reality, which is that child sexual abuse and exploitation are happening in every area of this country, and are perpetrated by members of every social class, every race and every religion. Reform MPs are chuntering on the Opposition Benches, but that is a fact, and when they deny that, they are failing victims and survivors. When

[*Nadia Whittome*]

they say that abuse is imported from other cultures, they imply that abuse is the norm and is okay in some cultures towards some victims. It never is.

Just as perpetrators are diverse, so are their victims. If we mask the reality, we cannot tackle the problem. What the vast majority of perpetrators have in common is that they are men. Of course, it is not all men, but it is enough men and enough victims for male violence to be a national emergency, and one that the whole House must commit to ending.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Lady worry, like me, that the recent attempt in the debate to reopen an inquiry is less about supporting victims and stamping out sexual violence, and more about inciting racial tensions?

Nadia Whittome: I share the hon. Member's concerns. I also take the opportunity to applaud her for her work over many years in this House on the all-party parliamentary group for childhood trauma, raising the issue before it was politically convenient to do so.

I am thrilled that the Bill includes measures to help with families' costs, such as free breakfast clubs for all primary school children, which will boost children's wellbeing. I want to see us go further still and provide free school meals for all children. The Bill also allows the Secretary of State to cap the profits of children's home providers, ending the obscene scandal of local authorities forced to shell out huge sums to private providers. Finally, I urge that this ambitious and important Bill is backed by even further investment in areas that will improve children's wellbeing. We need more money for children and adolescent mental health services, for children's social care and to tackle child poverty.

2.46 pm

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): I am standing up to talk about the important issue of school uniforms, but I will first say that the hon. Member for Nottingham East (*Nadia Whittome*) was quite right to point out that child sexual abuse takes place across our society. We have just seen the Archbishop of Canterbury and others in the Church of England resign over child sexual abuse. For the hon. Member for Clacton (*Nigel Farage*) to deny that it affects all aspects of society is, frankly, for the birds.

I am a single parent to two teenagers and, like many other parents in this place, I know how many expenses are involved in sending children to school. As they grow and progress through school, they require different pairs of shoes, sets of stationery and money for school trips. State schools should represent a level playing field for children of all backgrounds, where pupils are treated with the same respect and given the same opportunities.

I recognise that a school uniform allows pupils to go into school with the same appearance and not be discriminated against or bullied for what they wear. However, school uniform is one of the biggest costs in sending children to school, and although I welcome the Government's commitment to limiting the number of branded items students are required to have each year,

more needs to be done to support parents during the cost of living crisis, when they are already facing higher energy bills and food costs.

From my experience of sending my daughter to state school, branded school uniform items are being sold from monopoly suppliers for an inflated price, compared with the items bought from high street and charity shops. The Bill talks about restricting schools to three branded items of uniform—by the way, I do not read that as excluding primary schools from letting kids wear ties. The bare minimum of three branded items of a jumper, a polo shirt and a skirt for my daughter's school costs more than double that from a high street shop. For a family with three children to have two sets of three branded items per year costs more than £300, compared with £108 from my local supermarket in Frome—nearly three times as much. That does not even account for a sports kit and shoes, or for the fact that children often require new items each year as they grow.

There are also parts of my constituency of Frome and East Somerset that operate a three-tier school system, meaning children move around three different schools with three different uniforms before they are 16. That can mean that parents have to adapt to three totally different uniforms, colours and requirements.

We should aim to strike a balance between students looking smart and not making uniforms overly complicated and exclusive. The simpler the uniform, which is based on staple and easily available items and colours, the more reusable it is. We should foster an environment where school clothes can be easily handed down through families, regardless of gender, and exchanged between families, either through the school or through charity shops, instead of focusing on brand new items for each child. That also reduces clothing and textile waste.

Will the Minister consider, for example, why three items were chosen rather than one, such as a school tie or jumper, which makes students easily identifiable as being from a particular school, but which leaves maximum options for parents to buy the other uniform elements from other retailers? Will she also consider what other additional measures could be taken to keep down the cost of a uniform? Kitting out a child for a new term at school is an expensive business, and anything the Government can do to support parents in keeping those costs down would be most welcome.

2.49 pm

Jake Richards (Rother Valley) (Lab): This Bill provides us with an important moment. For many decades, children's social care has been overlooked—an afterthought for Government. Over the past 30 years, politicians of all colours have too often failed the most vulnerable children in this country—the children who are unable to be looked after by their own family. I am delighted that this Education Secretary and her team have put those children at the heart of this legislation. It is testament to her personal commitment to social justice and fairness.

The statistics on outcomes for children in care and the risks of exploitation are well known. They represent 1% of the child population, but 37% of those in youth justice. Just 15% of those looked-after children receive GCSEs from C to A*, compared with the national average of 55%.

However, I wish to focus on the child placement estate. It is a drier topic, but if we do not provide sufficient and safe accommodation for these children, then the rest is broadly redundant. I have personal experience of this area. Before being elected as an MP, I was a barrister often working in child protection law. Many Friday afternoons would be spent in court, seeking orders on an urgent basis for removal of children from their primary carer before the weekend. My work would be done once judgment had been given and I had drafted the order, but for my social work team, their work had only just begun. They would have to collect the children, often relying on the police to assist, and then, often late in the evening, the arduous task of attempting to find suitable accommodation for these children would begin. They would make calls late into the night, pleading with reluctant foster carers, or residential units, to take in these young people, who would often sit obediently at the local authority offices waiting for their fate to be decided. I have known of times when children slept on the floors of such offices while searches were being undertaken. The lack of sufficient accommodation in this country is a complete disgrace.

The previous Government cannot say that they were not warned about this. In 2020, the High Court took the unusual step of sending a judgment to the relevant Ministers, raising the issue of the lack of appropriate accommodation for such children—I am just trying to find the right place in my speech.

Josh MacAlister (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jake Richards: I would be very grateful.

Josh MacAlister: Does he agree that provisions in the Bill for measures such as regional care co-operatives, which would agglomerate services—bring them together—across local authorities, to do some of the work of commissioning, recruiting and building up children's homes would help with the problems that he describes?

Jake Richards: My hon. Friend's review, which he drew up before being elected to this place, contained some of the provisions that are now in this legislation, so he should be praised for that work.

As I was saying, the High Court raised this issue in 2020. It took the unusual step of sending a judgment to the relevant Minister setting out the “nationwide problem” of demand outstripping supply in accommodation for children in care. The facts of that case show the human cost of a lack of investment and strategy. A 15-year-old girl, from a family unable to care for her, had had 14 different placements in 12 months. None was suitable. She had repeatedly fled unregulated accommodation units and was deemed to be at serious risk of self-harm and sexual exploitation. Those who have raised the important issue of child sexual exploitation but have shown no interest in children's care services should hang their head in shame for trying to make political capital out of this very, very important issue. This Bill takes important steps in this regard. My hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) has already raised the important matter of regional co-operation, which will certainly add capacity.

As has been mentioned, there is also the financial backdrop. I have no doubt that Ministers will be making representations to the Chancellor about the estimated £6.2 billion funding gap for local authorities in social care, but this is not just about money. Although capacity is undoubtedly required, the system also needs national and local leadership, and a national and local strategy. There remains, despite this very welcome Bill, a lack of a comprehensive and national plan for care placements. There is a lack of an overarching assessment of how this market will fulfil the functions necessary in the years and decades ahead. Bluntly, we will still not know what is needed and where across the nation. And we know from experience that the market will not do it for us; we have learned that lesson already. We must have an accurate assessment of the need in the sector—the types of placement, and the number and location of care settings across the country. There also needs to be a funding strategy.

My private Member's Bill, the Looked After Children (Distance Placements) Bill, provides for a modest change in this area, simply requiring all local authorities to think ahead, to have a plan for the types of placement that they are able to offer, and a strategy for where they will need based on an assessment of the demand. Although there is a requirement in the guidance, there now needs to be a statutory responsibility for local authorities to think ahead in this area. At the moment, the issue is about not merely capacity, but where the accommodation is.

More than a fifth of children in care live more than 20 miles from their home. There is one account of a child being placed over 500 miles from her community. These are young lives being separated from their community, their brothers, sisters, friends and teachers, with all the associated damage to their relationships and education. And this problem has increased by over 50% since 2019. I hope the Government will properly consider the modest suggestion that local authorities should simply have a sufficiency plan for where to place these children.

I will briefly touch on one final aspect, which is the identifier of children. This is a useful and important step to safeguard children. I hope Ministers will have discussions on a cross-departmental basis with the Home Office as well as the Department of Health and Social Care about the development of digital identification and patient passports in those areas as well.

2.55 pm

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): Clause 7, which introduces proposed new section 23CZAA to the Children Act 1989 on Staying Close support, builds on the previous Conservative Government's “Stable Homes, Built on Love” strategy. In particular, I refer to the pledge to strengthen the Staying Close offer and provide a statutory basis for it. I therefore welcome the commitment to this in the Bill, particularly the requirement of local authorities to provide suitable accommodation for formerly looked after children well into adulthood.

At an event last year that I had the privilege to co-host, which was also attended by the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby), who is no longer in her place, we heard from four young people—Tahir, Bella, William and Jess—who have all been supported by Home For Good and Safe Families in supported lodgings. Supported

[Rebecca Smith]

lodgings is where a young person stays with a family who provides them with life skills. There is more to it—I can explain another time—but those are the basics of it. All the young people shared powerful stories of how living within a household had enabled them to pursue education and work and given them a place to call home and, in some cases, as one described, a second family.

How can supported lodgings help with the aims of staying close in this Bill? In October 2024, the “Voices of Supported Lodgings” was published, which had contributions from the four young people whom I have mentioned. It found that every Staying Close support category that is listed in the Bill has been proven to be provided by supported lodgings. On health and wellbeing, 84% of the young people reported that supported lodgings feels like home. On relationships, 89% had a good relationship with their host. On education, employment and training, young people in supported lodgings are 8% more likely to be in education and employment or training than other care leavers. And on participation in society, 90% of these young people felt more confident in their ability to live independently. Let us not forget that these are looked-after children—children who have spent a considerable amount of time in care.

Will the Government amend the Bill to specifically reference supported lodgings provision as a high-quality example of the Staying Close support that local authorities could provide for local care leavers? And with this, will they commit to provide the ability for local authorities to develop supported lodgings in their area through recruitment and the training of hosts?

For some young formerly looked-after people, private rented accommodation may be where they wish to live. However, without family to support them in securing a deposit or even acting as a guarantor, will the Government seek to extend the role of local authorities as corporate parents to require them to facilitate a rent deposit and guarantor scheme for looked-after children?

I also wish to touch on home-schooling. I did not get home-schooled, and I do not always think that it is the best option, but for many it is the choice that they have made for their children. But it feels like this Bill a hammer to crack a nut. I fully appreciate that there is a risk of children going missing from education, and that home-schooling can be used for inappropriate reasons, but many parents, including many constituents who have written to me, have opted to home-educate and are doing an excellent job and are deeply concerned about the proposed over-regulation that they face in the Bill.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I too had a number of representations from constituents who were concerned about the purpose behind these changes. What additional information do they elicit to the local authority when a proper education is being received? Does my hon. Friend agree that some clarity is required there, otherwise it just seems an unnecessary and intrusive intervention? Sometimes, those constituents asked questions about what the intent is behind the intervention of local authorities.

Rebecca Smith: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. The Bill is seeking a detailed explanation from parents of what they are planning to do at home with their children. Quite frankly, it will hinder the work that

they are doing in educating those children. Schools are probably not readily providing some of that information either.

I am concerned by the implication in the Bill that the state is better at parenting than parents themselves. The changes in the Bill directly contradict section 7 of the Education Act 1996, which affirms a parent's legal duty to ensure that their children

“receive efficient full-time education...either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.”

That is important, because it underscores the principle that parents, not the state, hold primary responsibility for the education of their children, except in the minority of cases where there is harm or neglect. Let us not forget that many parents opt to home-school because the state system has failed their children. I urge caution with the provision in the Bill, which will add further stress to such parents, who have already had to fight long and hard for their children.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I applaud my hon. Friend for the point that she is making. I, too, have had representations from excellent home-schooling parents. Does she think that there is a way, with reason and understanding on both sides, for a balance to be struck between the need to safeguard the right of responsible parents to home-school their children and the need to prevent the abuse of children by parents who have other, more sinister, objectives?

Rebecca Smith: My right hon. Friend is correct. There has to be a middle ground that we could find. I suggest that we are using a hammer to crack a nut. A lot of these parents are not against having to say something about what they are doing, but to suggest that they have to give chapter and verse to their local authority, which in many cases will have failed them already—that relationship may well have broken down—feels like too much of a strike.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rebecca Smith: I will make some progress, because I will not get any extra time for taking a further intervention.

The requirements in the Bill therefore risk hindering families who, for legitimate reasons—often because of failures in the SEND provision that they needed—have opted to educate their children at home. I have three questions for Ministers. Will the Government confirm that the evidence base for this part of the Bill is founded on accurate data and genuine needs, which reflects the questions asked by my right hon. Friends the Members for Salisbury (John Glen) and for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis)? Secondly, what assessment has been made of the potential consequences of the Bill for home-educating families and their ability to provide a tailored high-quality education, and might we inadvertently hinder them in doing that? Thirdly, will the Government work to protect the rights of home educators and prioritise the wellbeing of children over administrative convenience?

We have heard all sorts of contributions this afternoon on many topics, but as I said in my maiden speech, looked-after children are one of the key things that I wish to speak about. I believe very strongly in the

rights of parents to choose what is best for their children. I really hope that the Government will listen to today's contributions on both points, and that some amendments will be tabled in the next stage of scrutiny that would tighten up the Bill and make for an even better piece of legislation.

3.2 pm

Jess Asato (Lowestoft) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education for bringing forward this landmark piece of genuinely transformational legislation. As someone who spent three years in the voluntary sector fighting for vulnerable children, I know that the Bill prioritises children and their needs, righting many of the wrongs of the last 14 years of failure under the Conservatives. The Bill signifies a much-needed movement towards preventive services, which were shamefully slashed by the Conservative party. Sure Start, with its huge impact on child development, disappeared. Youth services were decimated. Due to the huge cuts by the Conservative party, in England we spend 11 times more on late intervention, and spending on early intervention has fallen by 44% since 2010.

The reforms laid out today, coupled with the funding needed to realise them properly, have the potential to ensure that, with the right support, more children can remain safely living with their birth families. The Bill should also ensure that when children need to live with foster parents or in a residential home, we are able to provide them with the best possible care. These children, after all, are the responsibility of the state. We are their parents, and we need to have the same high ambitions for them as we do for our own children. The recognition in the Bill that young people need more support when they first leave care must also be celebrated. The Bill will help to improve the situation by finally extending Staying Close to all areas of the country. That was a key recommendation of the independent review of children's social care.

That review also recommended extending corporate parenting principles, so that they apply not just to children's services but to a greater range of public organisations. In November, the Government outlined that that important reform would be implemented. Will the Secretary of State confirm that extending corporate parenting responsibilities remains part of the Government's plan to improve support for care leavers? We have also heard about the postcode lottery in the help available for care leavers. The support that a young person receives too often depends on where they live, not what they need. That is why we need a national offer of support, which could include things suggested by the children's charity Barnardo's, such as the right to a free bus pass, free prescriptions, and help with rental deposits.

Like the Children's Commissioner for England, I believe that the Bill presents an opportunity for this House to ensure finally that children in England, like their counterparts in Scotland and Wales, receive equal protection from assault and battery. We cannot adequately ensure children's welfare if we fail to protect their physical safety and wellbeing. A 2021 review in *The Lancet* of 70 studies found that physical punishment had no positive outcomes for children, and was instead linked to greater child behaviour problems over time. The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health also found that children who experience physical punishment are 2.6 times more

likely to experience mental health problems, and potentially 2.3 times more likely to experience more serious forms of physical abuse. These children are also more likely to believe that violence is an acceptable and normal way of expressing frustration, contributing to a cycle of violence in society that we need to break.

Though physical punishment may, for many of us, seem a relic of the past, data from 2020-21 found that more than one in five 10-year-olds have experienced physical punishment, and the NSPCC has seen a threefold increase in the number of child welfare calls mentioning physical punishment in the past couple of years. Given that 71% of adults believe that physical punishment is unacceptable, the time to end this injustice is now. In the context of one child dying every four days from deliberately inflicted injuries, and the horrific murder of Sara Sharif, whose father sought to justify her treatment under the dark cloak of discipline, it is clear that the threat of violence that children face should no longer be given legal cover.

The Bill does so much for children and young people, and it is my view that by extending corporate parenting, ensuring equal protection and establishing a national care leavers offer, we can do even more to ensure that everyone growing up is given the opportunity to flourish.

3.7 pm

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Reform): Given that the Opposition amendment has been selected, I will not stand here and outline my disgust at what has happened with regard to the historic grooming gang scandal. The British people want answers, so I will ask questions of the Labour party, and several of them.

Will the Government commit to deporting all guilty foreign nationals involved urgently, including family members who were aware of the crimes and therefore complicit? Wives, sisters, mothers and cousins, if they knew and said nothing, are just as guilty as the rapists themselves. Will the Government commit to stripping citizenship from dual nationals implicated and deport them as well? Race or religion must protect nobody. Will the Government commit to pausing all Pakistani visas and foreign aid into the country until the Pakistani Government agree to accept any of their deported citizens who have perpetrated these crimes on British soil, and imprison these rapists and their accomplices in Pakistan however they see fit?

Will the Government undertake a full investigation into officials who had knowledge of these crimes yet failed to act? A specified taskforce to root out this evil should be established. We should not just fire these vile individuals but prosecute them. How many girls are estimated to have been raped? Is there a tally for the overall number of rapes? Horrifyingly, it may well be in the millions. We just do not know. How many vulnerable young girls are estimated to still be involved in these gangs? If there is no estimated figure, why not?

Will a regular update be published detailing ongoing prosecutions and sentencing? Will the Government publish a full nationality breakdown of those convicted for such offences, along with the location of their crimes? How many known foreign rapists are there per town, per region? Will the Government publish a breakdown of the immigration status of those involved? On what grounds were they in the UK? Do they have previous convictions? How many foreign nationals found guilty have been released but not deported?

Caroline Voaden: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Rupert Lowe: I will carry on, if that is all right.

How many re-offences have occurred since release? How many of these monsters are walking on the same streets as the girls they raped and abused? One report suggested that a victim came face to face with her rapist in the supermarket. Are the Government comfortable with that? How many of the foreign rapists were in receipt of any form of state benefit?

Caroline Voaden: Will the hon. Member give way?

Rupert Lowe: I will carry on, if that is all right.

How many who were released receive any state benefits? How many children have been born following a rape by those men? How many have been given access to the child against the mother's wishes, and how many have used the child as a route to remain in the UK? Will the Government commit to preventing that in future? How many deportations have been blocked due to the rapist's right to a family life or due to other European Court of Human Rights influences?

Will the Government set up a dedicated, confidential and accessible official process for whistleblowers to safely raise their concerns about foreign rape gangs, ensuring that it is safe, secure and easy to find? Will the Government release all court transcripts relating to those cases so that the British people can understand just part of the horror for themselves? How many of those documents have been hidden due to the cost of release? That should not be an obstacle to the transparency of those trials. Will lifelong sentences be considered for British citizens involved in the crimes, and for those in positions of power who acted to cover up the scale of the abuse? Which politicians, local and national, had knowledge of the events but failed to act—again, going as far as actively concealing what was truly happening?

Those are the facts that the British people want and deserve to know. All those questions have also been submitted in written form, and I look forward to receiving open and transparent answers. The mass rape of young white working-class girls by gangs of Pakistani rapists is a rotting stain on our nation. This is not about Elon Musk. This is not a bandwagon of the far right. This is about the victims and ensuring that swift and brutal justice is delivered to those demons responsible. It is about distinguishing between right and wrong.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Will the hon. Member give way?

Rupert Lowe: I have finished.

3.11 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I welcome the Bill because it addresses a lot of the underlying problems we have in our schools and education and, indeed, in the protection of children. I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to make this a child-centred Bill.

I feel disgusted by what the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe) has just said. Can anyone imagine listening to that as a victim or a survivor? I am

sure his intent is to get to the truth and get justice, but the language—I ask him please to think about who hears our words.

On 26 November 2024, in her letter to the chair of the child safeguarding practice review panel, the Secretary of State for Education said:

“The forthcoming Children's Wellbeing Bill is a vital mechanism for improving the lives of vulnerable children... there is a renewed government focus on tackling child sexual abuse... which will necessarily include our response to the IICSA recommendations.”

I want to take this opportunity to ask the Secretary of State which of those recommendations fall squarely within the Bill. I hope, with cross-party support, that we can encourage the Secretary of State to adopt them.

The independent inquiry into child sexual abuse published 20 recommendations, trying to address the whole of child sexual abuse in this country, to get support for those victims and survivors and early intervention to prevent the crime, and to get the prosecutions we all desperately want. Recommendation 1 was that there should be a core dataset. Currently, the Bill's single unique identifier number is not the same as a core dataset. There is a need for a unified set of data that allows authorities to understand better the prevalence of abuse, to identify patterns and to inform evidence-based policymaking. We have a patchy, fragmented data system that hinders effective prevention and intervention. IICSA asked for the creation of a single core dataset that includes the characteristics of victims and alleged perpetrators of child sexual abuse, vulnerability factors and the settings and contexts in which the abuse occurred.

Recommendation 2 is for a child protection authority for England and Wales. Recommendation 3 is for a Cabinet Minister for child protection, and that needs to be someone who cuts across all the different Departments, because that is where we are failing children right now—we do not have a joined-up approach to child protection.

Recommendation 4 is for a public awareness campaign, and cultural awareness is included throughout the recommendations. We need to make children aware of the risks they face, but we also need to tackle cultural insensitivities and much worse wherever we find them. That is particularly pertinent to me, because I am proud that I got the previous Government to ensure that every child, from primary school, had relationships education. However, in September 2024 the Department for Education published an independent evidence review on “Teaching relationships education to prevent sexual abuse”. It found that teachers were still not receiving adequate training. There are not adequate resources for those teachers, so I urge the Secretary of State to use the Bill to do something about that. Specifically, will she ringfence relationships, health and sex education training budgets?

Caroline Voaden: A fantastic organisation in my South Devon constituency called Child Assault Prevention, which I worked with when I worked for Devon Rape Crisis, had to close its doors two years ago because its funding was cut by the previous Government. It was doing vital work with primary school children, teaching them about the dangers of sexual assault and how to avoid it. I would welcome the Government looking at reinstating funding to such organisations that are working with young children in this sensitive area.

Sarah Champion: I absolutely echo what the hon. Member says; that work is so important.

Recommendation 13 is on mandatory reporting. I was keen to hear the Home Secretary say that it will be one of her objectives, but it also needs to cover those in all positions of trust. I am very concerned that if we have mandatory reporting without the resources for the administration to act on that, it becomes no more than a tick-box exercise, and that the very teachers and training staff who should be protecting children get penalised and, worse, prosecuted as a consequence?

IICSA took seven years and cost £186 million. It had over 2 million pages of evidence and 725 witnesses. Over 6,000 victims and survivors put their trust in the process and gave evidence. They did all this and we spent all this money so that the recommendations would be implemented. There was also a Home Office report. Again, I spent a year of my life putting into the Home Office report in 2020, which gave the solutions. I spent two years in the IICSA inquiry specifically around grooming gangs. The recommendations have not been adopted.

I say with the deepest respect to all those calling for a national inquiry to instead put all their energy into getting the recommendations adopted. With the best will in the world—you all know me; I am not making a party political point—another inquiry will mean another 10 years of waiting. What I want to see, and what I truly believe we all want to see, is child protection right now. I urge hon. Members please to consider what they are doing and to use Report as the time to make the amendments to get the changes they want.

3.18 pm

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): There are two sides to the Bill. Indeed, it could easily have been two Bills, and it may have made for stronger legislation had it been dealt with as two Bills. I commend the Government on one aspect, which is children's wellbeing, and so much that is part of the Bill is good and commendable. It is wonderful to see the building up of the work being done on the Staying Close programme, which is already demonstrating positive results, and the evidence shows the impact it has on people's lives. I was delighted to see that much of the work undertaken by the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) when he was commissioned to do the report under the last Government has been embraced and is being taken as part of it and being built upon. I am also delighted about the work done on fostering and kinship care, which we know have such a positive impact on the lives of so many young people—it is good to see that in the Bill.

However, the other side of the Bill, on schools, is cause for very serious concern. The Government have said:

"The current discrepancy between maintained schools and academies leaves potential for inconsistencies in education standards, opportunities and outcomes for pupils from different types of schools."

That is an interesting point. Looking through the clauses, it seems to be not about driving excellence in our schooling system, but about dragging the excellent down.

I will take this chance to go through some of those clauses—and perhaps even the Ministers might take the time to familiarise themselves with them. Clause 45

ends academy schools' freedom on teacher pay. The idea that academy schools are using that freedom to do anything other than attract the teachers and specialists that they need to get the best for their pupils is crazy.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): Some multi-academy trusts offer terms and conditions on sick pay after six weeks that are only a little above the statutory minimum. If one of their teachers falls seriously ill, they should have access to the same protections available to any other teacher.

Sir Gavin Williamson: The Bill removes academies' ability to do more for teachers. The Ark academy trust, for example, pays its teachers an average of 2.5% more than every national pay point. Where academies have areas of specialism, they have used them as an opportunity to pay more and bring the best teachers in.

As we progress through the Bill, clause 50 gives the schools adjudicator the power to set public admission numbers for schools, including academies, giving local authorities greater influence over admission numbers for schools in their areas. In reality, that will mean that the very best schools lose out on the ability to expand rapidly and offer more children the opportunity to go there. That is increasingly important at a time when overall student numbers are starting to decline. The best schools have less opportunity to offer more spaces to pupils in their communities.

Clause 44 repeals the requirement to turn failing local authority schools into academies. There is already a great deal of ambiguity about failing schools. What will the Government do about them? That has not been made clear. Ofsted's powers have been watered down, which will mean that failing schools continue to exist and there will be no change.

Graham Stuart: Does my right hon. Friend agree that Ministers must set out how failing schools will be tackled? We cannot have a system in which children are left in schools that let them down without immediate action. That is what the academies programme sought to address.

Sir Gavin Williamson: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. There is total silence on what will happen. There is no sense that where a school is failing, action will be taken to ensure that successful academy trusts take over those schools and drive improvements.

What we have heard from the Government since they came into office has been about getting rid of excellence. I was very proud of a number of the programmes that we introduced, such as the Latin excellence programme or more cadet forces in schools. The evidence points to the fact that those things had a real impact on children's attainment, and often for children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Those programmes have just been scrapped. There is a sense that the Government want a homogeneous schools system in which brilliance and excellence, and the freedom for teachers and schools to deliver the very best for their pupils, are stamped out. There is a sense that Ministers know best—that Whitehall is the master—and that that will drive our education system forward.

Many aspects of the Bill are positive in relation to children's wellbeing, but I urge the Minister to consider the other aspects that will systemically destroy the progress

[Sir Gavin Williamson]

made by both Labour and Conservative Governments in driving forward academic excellence, and in allowing state schools to offer some of the things that private schools offer, which they had not been able to do before. At my comprehensive school, joining a cadet force or learning Latin were simply not options. The Bill is about dumbing down. It is not about raising aspiration; it is not about raising excellence.

3.25 pm

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): Actually, the Bill will ensure that every child growing up in this country will have the best possible start in life, and will break down the barriers to opportunity. Like the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson), I went to a comprehensive, and I believe that comprehensive, state-run education should be excellent—that is why I support the Bill.

Every teacher I spoke to before the election was cheesed off with what was happening in education. They were so depressed about what they were doing—that is one of the reasons I got involved in this. Every teacher I have spoken to who has read the Bill supports it. Surely we should be listening to them.

Colleagues have mentioned mental health. The Government will bring a mental health worker into every school. That is not in this Bill, because it is a matter for the Department of Health and Social Care, but it will transform that area.

Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman just said that the Government would bring a mental health worker into every school. Could he repeat that, for the avoidance of doubt?

Dr Opher: That is our manifesto commitment.

One reason I am here is that, under the last Tory Government, a child in my constituency had to wait six months for treatment following a suicide attempt at school, and that is simply not acceptable. On the review of the curriculum, every teacher I have spoken to has said that we need to improve the arts and music, which would in itself improve wellbeing.

Rather less controversially, I will concentrate on clause 22 and the provision of free breakfast clubs. I have been a GP for the past 30 years, and I understand that health and education are inextricably linked—we cannot learn when we are hungry. Free breakfast clubs will ensure that every child, irrespective of their background, has the foundation they need to start the day. There is strong evidence that obesity is a massive problem harming the wellbeing of our children. Some 10% of children entering reception are obese, and in year 6, 22% are obese. Free breakfast clubs will reduce those numbers.

In Stroud, we have been working really closely with local primary schools to get nutritious local food into the school diet, not relying on national companies to do so. We have a commitment to try to procure 50% of that food from the local agricultural community; I am very proud of that, and keen to encourage it. Another point about breakfast clubs is that it is really important that children eat together—that is what we used to do at our

primary school. It fosters a feeling of wellbeing, and the Long Table in Stroud is an organisation that encourages that.

We need to be careful of the food industry lobby, which is incredibly powerful and has been providing free food for breakfast clubs. All I would say is that there is no such thing as a free breakfast. Companies are trying to promote their own products, and we must be very wary of them.

There is quite a lot of evidence that free school meals reduce obesity, and I would support their universal roll-out, not just in Wales and London. In London, there has been a reduction in obesity levels as well as improvements in learning, so let us work towards that when conditions allow. In the interim, we should go for auto-enrolment for free school meals, which would improve funding for schools and enable about 400,000 children to receive those meals.

I conclude by commending the Government for committing to ensure that every child has the opportunity to thrive. The Bill is a bold step towards addressing inequalities and improving the lives of the next generation. By introducing free breakfast clubs, this Government are not only tackling hunger but investing in health and education. As such, I urge my hon. Friends not to get waylaid by the political things that are going on around this Bill. It is an excellent Bill, and we need to support it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): To ensure that as many colleagues as possible can get in, and that not many are disappointed by not getting in, we are going to reduce the speaking limit to four minutes. I call Vikki Slade.

3.31 pm

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will go as quickly as I can, because I had timed my speech to five minutes.

The death of Sara Sharif shocked us all. As my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr Forster) said before recess, we have the opportunity to change the law so that her legacy is to be

“the last vulnerable child to be killed by people who should have looked after her.”—[*Official Report*, 18 December 2024; Vol. 759, c. 312.]

We often recall the names of Victoria Climbié and baby Peter Connelly, but so many more children and babies have been the innocent victims of evil parents and family members, neglectful professionals and siloed systems. Their memories should be etched on our hearts as we consider this Bill.

I welcome the moves in part 1 of the Bill to strengthen the multi-agency approach, but I agree with the Children's Commissioner and the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) that we should go further in protecting children from assault. Some of the injuries inflicted on children such as Sara Sharif under the guise of reasonable punishment have been beyond belief, but if “reasonable punishment” is not defined in law, that must make it very difficult for some social workers to take the appropriate action.

I have been shocked by just how many of the child deaths reported are of babies—infants who have not reached school or nursery and whose voices are literally

unheard. I worry that the role of the health visitor in the lives of new parents has been so greatly reduced. As a new mum, I would join other parents at regular weigh-in sessions and playgroups alongside health visitors, right through to when my child started nursery. GPs in my constituency of Mid Dorset and North Poole have told me that they would previously liaise with the health visitors in their surgeries to warn families who were at risk—perhaps a mum had come in for a smear test and they were worried about domestic abuse, or a father had come in and they were worried about alcohol abuse. They could send the health visitor in and check up on those families, but that does not happen any more, thanks to the smashing of the system under the previous Government.

Turning to the schools part of the Bill, I am sorely disappointed that it lacks anything to support children with special educational needs and disabilities. There is no requirement for schools to be inclusive of such children, and nothing about the need for teachers to be trained in autism or social and emotional health. Previously, when challenging the Minister, I have urged more action and have been told to wait for this Bill, but if there were an Ofsted judgment, it would be “requires improvement”. When my child was pushed out of school, unable to cope full time and obviously not going to achieve the heady heights of five GCSEs and 90% attendance, we seriously considered home education. To hear your child say, “Mum, they don’t want me here” breaks your heart. The lack of accountability in academies is just not okay, so I welcome the move to bring academies more under the control of local authorities.

Home education is a right of parents, and it can be transformational for some children. My constituent Katie, who chooses to educate her children at home, has raised concerns about schools referring a family to social services if they indicate their wish to move to home education. Will the Minister confirm that it will not be possible for a school to refer a family simply because they choose to opt out? There are also concerns about the risks to parents fleeing domestic abuse when the other parent does not have any involvement, because under this Bill the register requires permission from both parents and will list both parents, which simply would not be possible in that situation. If that means that single parent families are excluded, that is simply not okay.

Finally, there is an opportunity to properly support families for whom school does not work. Proposed new section 436G, on page 55 of the Bill, talks about support, but provides none. We need parents to have the ability to access the national curriculum, free resources and free examinations.

3.35 pm

Mrs Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): There are so many fantastic provisions in this Bill that it is quite hard to know where to start. However, the first thing I want to say is that the move to restrict the number of branded school uniform items will, I know, be so welcomed by parents in my Congleton constituency. So many of them who have spoken to me are struggling and finding it really very difficult to make ends meet, as they have done for many years. I have spoken to parents who are working two jobs and desperately trying to put food on the table.

I know that those parents will also strongly welcome the provision of free breakfast clubs. I have spoken to the Secretary of State about the importance of children with special educational needs being able to access those breakfast clubs and holiday provision. I know she looked at that in the pilot of free breakfast clubs, and I will continue to emphasise it.

The other thing I would like to mention about free breakfast clubs is toothbrushing, which we certainly talked about during the general election. I believe there are pilots for toothbrushing in breakfast clubs, and I would love to see that rolled out widely. Toothbrushing is so crucial, and working parents who drop children off early of course find it difficult to ensure that their children’s teeth are brushed before school. It is best done every day, so I would welcome our extending that as far as possible.

My favourite thing about the Bill is that it really demonstrates our commitment to all the children in our communities, in all schools, having the best possible opportunities, both because it is morally imperative and because the education of today is the national productivity of the workforce tomorrow. We all have to keep that in the front of our minds, and I know that the Minister absolutely does.

I would like to say one or two things about the identifier system we are bringing in with this Bill. Many colleagues have referred to some horrific situations that this seeks to avoid, and to the position of children who are outside school. I want to reassure parents in my constituency that those who have chosen to home-school absolutely have my support. This is not about penalising parents who make that choice, or about restricting freedom of choice; it is about protecting children who are already identified as extremely vulnerable. I know that everyone here supports that, or I would hope they do.

I want to mention the use of the single identifier to track the potential educational outcomes of children in temporary accommodation. I have spoken before in this House of my significant concerns about how, when children lose their accommodation, they often lose their school place and may spend considerable periods outside the education system. Some children lose their accommodation repeatedly during their childhood, and therefore move schools on multiple occasions. I think the capacity to track that, and to track the outcomes for those children, is really important. That is a hugely important power in the Bill, and I hope we will use it in that way.

Lastly, thank everyone for the intelligent and constructive points they have made today, and the Liberal Democrats for their constructive support for the Bill—there are others in the House who really could learn from their example.

3.38 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): My interest in this all started when I became a governor of the second school ever to become an academy, back in the late 1990s. I then spent some time with the former Director of Public Prosecutions on improving the practice of prosecuting rape gangs and child sexual abusers in the early 2010s. What all that demonstrated to me was that much will revolve around the quality of the professional practice that the Bill leads to, rather

[David Simmonds]

than what we put into law in this Parliament. We can debate many things that we want to see improved, but it is important that we recognise and thank the social workers, police officers and medical staff who currently ensure that we in the UK have one of the most effective and safest child protection systems of any nation in the world. It is important to acknowledge that.

As many Members have said, there is much in the Bill that Conservative Members will welcome. For example, the implementation of family group decision making, building on the family group conferencing model, and the work to build on the success that virtual headteachers have had in driving up attainment and ensuring that children in care are now among the best school attenders of any group of children in our country, are to be commended. In particular, in the case of proposed new section 16EB on bringing partnerships together, the working together guidance that was last updated in 2023 will have to do a lot of heavy lifting to ensure that the aspirations we set out work in practice, particularly in respect of education.

The main purpose of the Bill is to create a responsibility for local authorities to bring education to the table, but it does not go so far as to create a duty or obligation on schools, nurseries and childminders to participate reciprocally. That has been an issue for a long time in our system. It was an issue with area child protection committees, local safeguarding children boards and local safeguarding partnerships, so we must ensure that we get it right. Will Ministers ensure that the guidance makes clear to school leaders, governors and trusts that they have an obligation to ensure that they fully commit to, and participate in, those local safeguarding arrangements?

I have two final and important points. First, I entirely agree with the point made by the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato). I asked the Deputy Prime Minister about ending the reasonable chastisement defence in law, and although I understand it is a matter of Home Office legislation, I was astonished to hear the Secretary of State for Education say that she was “open-minded” about the issue. I would like a clear assurance from the Government that they will respond to those calls, and that we will ensure that we close that loophole for good, for children such as Dwelaniyah Robinson and Sara Sharif, whose deaths have occurred with people trying to justify violence on the basis that it was reasonable punishment. We must ensure that all children enjoy equal protection in our country.

Finally, let me turn to the call for a national inquiry. The Prime Minister said in response to questions this afternoon that he is open-minded about that, and the Safeguarding Minister has said the same thing. Those of us with experience will know that when we look at publicly available serious case reviews, all of which we can read on the NSPCC website, we see that these cases are often complicated. There are grooming gangs, and there are also drug gangs of people who are both abused and abusers, who coerce boys into sexual activity. There are schoolteachers and clergymen who carry out this activity. We must ensure that, although certain groups of victims and perpetrators may be in the headlines, we recognise the diversity and complexity of this issue if we are to deal with it effectively.

3.43 pm

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): It saddens me to make this contribution. Three main aspects of the Bill are of particular concern to me: the proposal to make it compulsory for academies to teach the national curriculum; the harmonisation of teachers' pay across academies and maintained schools; and the pathway for future failing schools. When I was elected in 1997, two of our four secondary schools were in the bottom performing 5% of schools in London, and London was the worst region in the country. Today we have three academies—Harris Academy Merton, Harris Academy Morden, and St Mark's Academy—and I am delighted to tell the House that they are all Ofsted-rated “outstanding”. I wish to thank the principals, Julian Sparks, Aisha Samad, Hannah Fahey and their teams for all their efforts.

According to Ofsted's latest inspection report, one of the keys to the success of Harris Academy Merton is its “aspirational curriculum”—its version of our national curriculum that is flexible and tailored to pupils' individual needs. Ofsted stated that teachers at the academy were able to carefully consider what pupils needed to learn, and the right time for pupils to revisit that knowledge. That is a proven recipe for success, not just at Harris Academy Merton but in academies across England. I struggle to see how removing the right to a carefully tailored education will benefit students who need the additional support that such an education provides. Forcing schools such as Harris academy to teach the national curriculum risks undermining one of the keys to their success.

I have serious concerns about the proposal to change the pathway for turning around failing schools. I know from bitter personal experience that any change to the status of a school can become highly political. The current system, in which failing schools automatically become academies, provides clarity and de-politicisation, and ensures a rapid transition. I fear that making that process discretionary would result in a large increase in judicial reviews, pressure on councils and prolonged uncertainty, which is in nobody's interests. I understand that a change might be needed to ensure that failing schools are taken over by the right academy for their needs, and not by a weak academy, and there should be a list of those academies that are not up to it, but we should not put the process at risk.

My contribution is born of 27 years' experience. I have fought teaching unions and anti-academy groups, because the most important thing is the ability of children to achieve—not our aspiring to that, and saying, “That's what we want,” but putting the structures in place that actually bring that about. Do not put that at risk.

3.47 pm

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I will vote for the reasoned amendment and against the Bill, not only because of the catastrophic damage that the Bill will do to the academy movement, as so amply explained by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh), but because it fails to take the opportunity for a national public inquiry dedicated to the child rape and grooming scandal. Yes, victims and survivors want action now, but they also want answers. I fear that there is a great misunderstanding

and misinformation about the previous national inquiry led by Professor Jay. That was an all-encompassing umbrella inquiry on child sex exploitation.

Jess Asato: Does the hon. Member agree that there was a two-year inquiry on organised networks and sexual exploitation, which is grooming gangs, in the language of inquiry? The chief executive of the National Association for People Abused in Childhood said:

“we urge the Government to focus on delivering improvements... rather than proposing new inquiries that may potentially delay action even further”.

Richard Tice: I shall come to the hon. Lady's point, but the reality is that Professor Jay's inquiry was an overarching one, and its references to grooming gangs were minuscule. It mentioned only Rotherham, but we know that there are dozens of towns—primarily Labour-led towns—where horrific things have taken place. Victims and survivors want not only action but answers. This is an opportunity for both. The hon. Lady referred to the need for action, but surely, in this great nation of ours, we can ensure both, in parallel. We can say, “Yes, these actions are required, following the recommendations of the Jay inquiry, but alongside that, for continuing public confidence and to get the answers that victims and survivors want, we need to keep exploring in specific towns.”

Sarah Champion: The inquiry the hon. Gentleman seeks was part of the overarching inquiry. There were 12 separate inquiries. One of them lasted two years, and resulted in a 185-page report that was specific about grooming gangs. What more information do we need? We know who the perpetrators are, we know the model and we know the victims. What we want is prosecution, and support for the victims.

Richard Tice: The hon. Lady is quite right that the victims and survivors, where we know them, want answers, action and prosecution, but I regret to say that there are many towns where people do not know the perpetrators and the truth has not been exposed. The reality is that many councils have a vested interest in not digging into the truth, because it will expose the failings of their councillors and officers. That is why we must have a national inquiry dedicated to this horrific issue. We should be ambitious and say that it does not need to take three, five or seven years, for heaven's sake. Let us do it in one year, and get it done. Let us have the appropriate number of people inquiring into town after town, examine the results, and get the answers. That is what will restore the confidence of the British people—action immediately, and answers within a year or so. Surely, as a nation, we can do this.

3.51 pm

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I first met my constituent Claire Throssell at a remembrance service at my old secondary school in Penistone. Every year, the headteacher marks the deaths of Claire's sons, former pupils Jack and Paul Sykes, who died at the hands of their father, known to be domestically abusive, in a house fire that he started while on a permitted contact visit. The names of most of the children who have been murdered at the hands of their domestically abusive parents in the decades since Claire's boys were killed remain unspoken, but we must not forget them.

Women's Aid research found that between 2005 and 2015, 19 children, including Jack and Paul, had been killed as a result of unsafe contact with abusive parents. Those children have to remain nameless to avoid causing further distress to their families. Many more deaths will have followed, uncounted and unrecalled. The number of children at risk may be on an even higher scale; in the year to March 2024, in England and Wales, 215,640 “child in need” social care case assessments identified that either a child or parent was experiencing domestic abuse. One name is sadly known to us only too well: Sara Sharif. Her tragic death makes the need for action on this issue all the more poignant, the sentencing of her murderers having taken place just before Christmas.

The Bill will help protect children like Sara. It will create a safer, higher-quality education system for every child, and will introduce a register of children who are not in school, to help ensure that no child falls through the gaps when home-educated. Our Government are taking strong action in response to Sara's death through the Bill's establishment of a single unique identifier for children, and the introduction of new duties that will improve information sharing across and within agencies, bringing together multi-agency child protection teams from education, social work and the police.

I commend the Secretary of State for Education for bringing forward a Bill so transformative of child protection, and so powerful in strengthening regulations on the use of agency workers in children's social care. My constituent Claire Throssell promised her two boys that no other children would die in the same tragic circumstances. I am proud that our mission-led Government have a mission to halve violence against women and girls in a decade, and recognise the need to use every Government tool available to target perpetrators and address the root causes of abuse and violence. Achieving this mission and fulfilling the promise that Claire made to her children will require us to connect the incredible strategic work in the Bill with the urgent need to change the law to remove the family courts' presumption in favour of contact. This principle, added via the Children and Families Act 2014 to the Children Act 1989, allows known abusers to have contact with their children, putting their lives at risk.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Tidball: No, I will make progress. The Bill will implement child-centred government, emphatically embedding it in education and children's social care, and there must be parallel work to put children first in the family courts. That important piece of the jigsaw puzzle will complement the Bill. I commend the Bill to this House. It takes a landmark approach to safeguarding children at risk, and I am proud to support it.

3.55 pm

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for all the work that she has done on child sexual abuse. I want to speak on two limited measures in the Bill: first, the registration of children not in school, a positive measure that builds on the work of the previous Government; and secondly, the clauses on teacher training.

[Sir Julian Smith]

We know from our casework that the measure on a register is positive and will play a big role in ensuring that children are not lost or hidden in the system. In implementing and applying the measure, I urge the Government to consult with SEN charities and organisations, particularly organisations working with autistic kids and families. Ambitious about Autism makes the case that the register should contain more data on the profile of children not at school, disaggregated by primary need. It is vital for autistic children and families that we put on a clear footing the expectation that there will be detailed profile data, so that schools and councils can offer more tailored support in getting them back to school. Children with pathological demand avoidance require a completely different approach when it comes to negotiating school entry, and we must ensure that their needs are met with patience and understanding.

Graham Stuart: My right hon. Friend will be aware that although many home-educated children with autism are known to local authorities, there is very poor support for them. How will this burdensome, expensive register—it will be even more expensive if he has his way—transform the support that children need, rather than being just another bureaucratic exercise that continues the current woeful level of support?

Sir Julian Smith: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention, but I make clear my support for the register.

The other aspect to having more rules and regulation for families of autistic children is the inadvertent risk of penalising those families through fines and the imposition of stricter rules, which will obviously add to the harm and stress that they often face. I urge Ministers and civil servants to reflect on that. Why should those parents be fined if they are doing all they can to get their children into school?

Even more problematic is the fact that for autistic kids, the clearer, firmer and harsher rules—even with all the good intent that I believe there is—can add further trauma and make school entry even more difficult. That already happens with registration. Schools are rightly under pressure from Government to ensure that children get to school on time. However, parents of autistic children, particularly with a PDA profile, have done amazingly well to get their children to the school gate at all, and the total focus on registration at a certain time of day at all costs risks school refusal and, ultimately, children missing education. Both Ambitious about Autism and the Children's Commissioner's report on support for autism and other conditions argue that a much better understanding of the different aspects of autism is key to getting children back to school.

At the heart of this matter are parents. Time after time, parents of autistic children are judged and challenged because schools and authorities assume that the issue is behaviour or bad parenting, or that the issue has a very simple cause. Making sure the measures in the Bill have a deeper understanding of what those families and kids are going through is absolutely vital.

The teaching measures will help. I again point to the work of the previous Government, supported by the Autism Society, making positive strides to introduce

autism training in initial teacher training. The more that individual teacher training programmes have specific models about different aspects of autism and challenges to school entry, and the more that can be done on continuous professional development for all staff—teachers, administration staff and receptionists—is key.

Autism is often at the centre of school refusal and non-attendance. As the Bill progresses through the House and into implementation, looking at these measures with the autistic child front of mind will not only transform the school experience of children and families, but in my view help address the core goal of the measures to improve school attendance.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Ind): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Julian Smith: Sorry!

4 pm

Mr James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in support of the Bill and wish to speak to the cost of living impact it begins to address.

Every child matters: not just political guidance, but an ideal to live by and to come into politics for. I therefore welcome the first steps that the Bill represents: steps towards a change in the security and fortunes of all young people in Bury and Britain. Ensuring the wellbeing of a child and the whereabouts of a child in Bury North has been one of my main priorities as an MP. It is also why I have long championed, both in this Parliament and in my previous time in this place, improvements to the appalling state of the special educational needs system.

A child's wellbeing, or their vulnerability, does not exist in a vacuum. It is tied to the conditions they grow up in. In Bury North we confront a grim reality: 42% of children in Bury North are living in absolute poverty. Poverty must no longer simply be glanced at by our politics. We must reach into it. It is a concentrated poverty—dense, multiple and compounded.

Richard Burgon: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Frith: I will not.

It is a poverty that has crept up on us faster and faster in recent years, where one mile's difference between postcodes can mean as much as a seven-year gap in life expectancy. It shows itself in poor, squalid housing, too few teachers in schools, a lack of accessible public or social services, an absence in quality public transport, the scourge of antisocial behaviour, victims of unpunished criminality, and even worse streets than the better-off wards are rightly animated by. Worse still is the poverty of opportunity, with children unaccounted for or not attending school at all.

I strongly support the Bill's first moves to ease the burdens faced by so many families, by cutting the cost of children going to school. Common sense on school uniforms will save parents more than £50 a child on the back-to-school shop. Free breakfast clubs for all primary school children will save hard-pressed parents up to £450 a year per child. Critically, that can help working parents to make their hours.

The ambitions of the Government go well beyond what the Bill starts. Eyes and expectations will turn to the child poverty taskforce and its recommendations, as well as the future work of this Parliament. We need to tackle the roots of these experiences, not just the symptoms. The Government are determined to transform the lives of children, with structural, strategic changes to life in Bury and Britain. It has been done before: Sure Start, the Building Schools for the Future programme, the maintenance allowance, the power of progressive social policies, the importance of the first 1,000 days of a child's life, foundation learning, and, yes, phonics and choice.

We will not let the inheritance from the Conservative party stop us. This will be a period of renewal and hope. Bury North's poorest are failed by living down the road from those doing just all right; another town overlooked and underserved by funding formulas that have only ever glanced at the place and its problems, and by the failures to level up, let alone even out. Let us be clear: the Bill is only the beginning—a good start. We must keep going, because every child matters.

4.4 pm

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate. Let me begin with the question of the need for a national inquiry into the rape grooming gangs. Given what has been said so far, I challenge colleagues who have opposed the inquiry to name a single proposal from the Jay report that cannot be implemented if we go ahead with it. It really is a matter of “and”. Notwithstanding the political theatre that Labour Members have tried to bring to the debate, the fact that both the Prime Minister and the safeguarding Minister have said that they are open-minded suggests that—sensibly, from a policy point of view and politically—the Labour party may move to the correct position.

As was pointed out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson), this is a Bill in two parts, which could probably most usefully have been two separate Bills. The first half concerns safeguarding, and, for the most part, my party and I support it; the second concerns schools, and that we most certainly cannot support. Rather than accusing our amendment of being a wrecking amendment, as the Liberal Democrats have rather disappointingly done, they should recognise that the second half of the Bill—the schools element—is the wrecking element, because it makes the important safeguarding improvements part of a Bill that cannot be genuinely supported in this House.

There is a troubling theme; a misguided notion that the bureaucrat knows best, as colleagues have suggested—for instance, the proposal to strip academies of the flexibility to set competitive pay for their staff. If the Government were genuinely interested in the levelling up that has just been referred to by the hon. Member for Bury North (James Frith), why not, as Sir Dan Moynihan, perhaps the nation's most successful headteacher and trust runner, said at lunch time today, give those academy freedoms to maintained schools? Why rip away the elements that have been used by academies to produce schools such as Michaela which are the best in the country? We have an ideologically driven Labour Government—that certainly applies to those on the

Front Bench; I would not want to daub everyone behind the Front Bench with the same description—who cannot even bring themselves to congratulate a school that has been the best in the country for three years in a row.

The Government are signalling that they do not trust schools to attract and retain the best teachers, and trust only the Secretary of State to do so. In advocating for new schools to be opened and controlled by local authorities, they remove the contestability. Notwithstanding some of the contradictions in the Secretary of State's speech, she did describe competition as “harmful”. I represent Beverley and Holderness, and for many years I looked at schools in Hull, where there was a view, expressed sotto voce, that “It is the people here who are the problem”. Generation after generation was failed, and when the academies programme was expanded in 2010, what happened? We saw primary schools leave local authority control en masse. We saw that it was no longer acceptable for a local authority to use its democratic mandate to give a substandard education to the local population. We saw a transformation. We saw academy groups opening up, and teachers and communities seizing that. I cannot believe that Labour Members really want to tear this away when the evidence is crystal clear from the OECD PISA tables. On any measure, English education has become immensely better.

Richard Burgon *rose*—

Graham Stuart: I may not believe that of the Labour party generally, but I would believe it to be possible of the hon. Gentleman.

Richard Burgon: The right hon. Gentleman is making various remarks about what he considers to be the failings and deficiencies of this excellent Bill. May I invite him to reflect on the fact that in my constituency, East Leeds, families and children have been really struggling over the last decade? The measures in the Bill to bring down the cost of school uniforms and provide free breakfast clubs in primary schools should be warmly welcomed and supported by all of us who care about children and families in our communities.

Graham Stuart: No one can be against the principle of breakfast clubs and efforts to make sure that families do not have excessive charges imposed on them by schools, although we need to look at the specifics. That has nothing to do with what I was saying. I ask the hon. Gentleman, and indeed other Labour Members, to reflect on the speech made by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh). I chaired the Education Committee from 2010 to 2015, and she and the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Sir Nicholas Dakin), who is on the Front Bench, were distinguished members of that Committee.

Damian Hinds: And me!

Graham Stuart: As was my right hon. Friend, of course.

I do not think that anyone with whom I have been in this House over the last 20 years has a more personal and visceral record of fighting for change in their constituency than the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden. Colleagues should consider that before they go into Committee and have the opportunity to reflect on the changes in this legislation, because she knows of

[Graham Stuart]

what she speaks. She has been heroic in championing the improvement in education in her area, and she has delivered it.

4.10 pm

Josh MacAlister (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): I welcome this Bill because it is a chance to make progress on resetting the children's social care system in England, and that is where I will focus my remarks. Children's social care is a special endeavour. It is a collection of kin, professionals and volunteers who seek to provide safe, stable and loving homes for children right across our country. They are the most important foundations for any child growing up—the foundations of family, of a tribe and of a sense of identity.

Having chaired the independent review of children's social care commissioned by the last Government, I have had the opportunity to spend time listening to thousands of people with direct experience of the system, and to make a number of recommendations on which I believe the legislation put forward today will deliver. One is about shifting away from late-stage crisis intervention, and another is about creating a sharper focus on a more expert-led child protection system. My other recommendations include unlocking the potential of family networks as an alternative to the care system, and moving away from a care system that breaks, rather than builds lifelong, loving relationships.

As somebody who has led an independent review for the Government that looked at a serious matter, which included engaging with and speaking to victims of sexual abuse and criminal abuse, I find it extraordinary that people who are sent to Parliament to be problem solvers are using this debate to be problem exploiters instead. We have stacks of evidence. We have had thousands of victims of sexual abuse provide heartbreaking and very painful evidence and testimony over many years, and it is our job to listen and to act, not to exploit at moments when the politics may be in our favour.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): In my constituency of Camborne, Redruth and Hayle, 32% of secondary school children are persistently absent from school. Some are home-schooled, but some are lost to the system without support. These are vulnerable children. This Bill is about protecting vulnerable children. Does my hon. Friend agree that voting against this Bill is playing politics with the protection of vulnerable children?

Josh MacAlister: I completely agree. I have a huge amount of respect for the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), who shared his comments a while ago, but if he and other Members were serious about this matter, they would table amendments to deliver on IICSA's recommendation not to go through the process again.

I will speak briefly about three particular measures in the Bill. First, it is welcome that we have proposals for family group decision making to be made compulsory at pre-proceedings stage, because there is very sound evidence that it works. A randomised control trial undertaken a few years ago shows that if family group decision making, in the form of a family group conference, was provided at pre-proceedings stage across England,

2,000 fewer children would enter care each year, and it would free up £150 million for earlier support for families. As local authorities start to deliver on the new requirement, it is extremely important that we do not just make it a tick-box exercise, and that we ensure that the evidence and practice guidance is there to support local authorities to deliver in a way that will be most effective.

Secondly, the Bill will create multi-agency child protection teams. These teams will fuse together—at an operational level, rather than just a strategic level—the relevant agencies needed to share information and then act on it to protect children from significant harm. It is important that, as well as getting the structure right, we focus on the professional expertise required to do the task of child protection, which is often so challenging.

We too often leave newbie social workers with the most challenging task of assessing significant harm by themselves. We do not ask the police to do that—we often send police officers out in pairs—and it is important that we support social workers on their route to expertise through the early-career framework, so that the most expert are making these challenging judgments on significant harm. I know Ministers are looking at that.

A unique child identifier is long overdue. I called for this in my review, as have a number of other reviewers. Again, I welcome the leadership that this Government have shown in acting on this in their first six months. It may sound like a modest technical change, but if it is delivered well, it will blow away the fog of confused and partial information sharing. I encourage Ministers to look at the Think family database in Bristol, which is a great example of what can be done when child-level data is shared by the police, education, children's services and health.

Finally, the introduction of regional co-operative arrangements will allow for bolder action to ensure that we have the foster carers we need in this country. Last year, 132,000 households expressed an interest in becoming foster carers, but we have approved only 1,800 of them.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): Calderdale council took the innovative step of giving foster carers a council tax break, which has been incredibly effective in recruiting foster carers. Would this and other such ideas be a good way to get more people into the system?

Josh MacAlister: I completely agree that we need to do an awful lot more to support the recruitment and retention of foster carers. Ministers have shown reforming zeal with this measure to provide the Secretary of State with powers to create regional care co-operatives across the country. If the Bill is passed, I urge Ministers to use this new power at pace and with boldness so that we can create the extra foster homes we need. If we follow the example of really effective fostering agencies in the voluntary sector, we could approve 15,000 new foster carers each year, rather than the 1,800 we approve at the moment.

I welcome these transformational changes and commend the Government for introducing the Bill so early. I look forward to supporting its passage.

4.17 pm

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): I declare my interest as a former director of the New Schools Network. As such, I have worked with many great free school and academy leaders.

I am enormously proud of the huge improvements in English schools over the last 14 years. In primary schools, English children are the best readers in the west. The PISA rankings show that we are: 11th in the world for maths, up from 27th under Labour; 13th in science, up from 16th under Labour; and 13th in reading, up from 25th under Labour.

In response to various debates and questions, the Education Secretary has made it clear that she does not really like these statistics, but the same story is told by the “progress in international reading literacy” study and the “trends in international mathematics and science” study. It is a shame that Ministers cannot bring themselves to celebrate this success story, or even to congratulate the leader of the best school in the country, Katharine Birbalsingh of the Michaela community school. Facts are very inconvenient when Ministers are so ideological about education.

The magic formula behind this success is one championed by Tony Blair, David Laws and all of us on the Conservative Benches today. The formula is freedom, accountability and evidence of what works. Through this Bill and other measures, the Government are unfortunately taking a sledgehammer to each of these principles. New free schools have been cancelled, the trust capacity fund has gone, and funds for schools that are planning to academise have been taken away. And this Bill is about to reverse academy freedoms, restore the powers of council bureaucrats and replace innovation with ideological uniformity. The clarity of Ofsted accountability has been ruined. Standard attainment tests in primary schools are in danger, and with them school accountability and progress data will go.

On the evidence base, this Government are anti-data, anti-facts and, indeed, anti-evidence, as we have heard during the debate. There have been attacks on synthetic phonics, maths mastery, a knowledge-rich curriculum, teacher-led instruction and traditional academic subjects. We have heard some Members explicitly reject the concept of academies and demand state-run schools. There is a denial of the scientific evidence behind what has worked. From the neurological knowledge we now have about how children learn, to the work of E. D. Hirsch on cultural literacy, and the confirmation that higher-level skills are dependent on the automatic mastery of lower-level activity, the Bill is based not on what works, but on what we know does not work.

Graham Stuart: Does my hon. Friend share my hope that Government Members will follow the example of the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh) and put the Bill under genuine scrutiny?

Nick Timothy: I share my right hon. Friend's admiration for the speech given by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh). It was incredibly powerful and I hope Members on the Labour Front Bench listened closely to what she said, even if they are not listening to me right now—they are looking at their phones. The Government have made a deliberate decision to dismantle everything that has worked.

Sarah Smith (Hyndburn) (Lab): How does the hon. Gentleman respond to the situation under the current system, whereby a third of young people fail to get a good GCSE in English and maths, and we have the most unhappy young people in the OECD?

Nick Timothy: I invite the hon. Lady to look at the studies that compare English schools with those in other countries, internationally and within the United Kingdom. The PISA statistics show that the most disadvantaged students in England have the same outcomes as average pupils in Wales, but the Government seem to be basing their policies on the Welsh system. I invite her to look at the evidence, even if Ministers will not.

Laurence Turner: My interest was piqued by the hon. Gentleman's description of Labour Members as being “anti-data”. He talks about the Welsh education system. Has he reviewed the arguments made by Professor John Jerrim, who conducted the 2015 review of the England PISA results and found that there is an anomaly with the treatment of Welsh language tests that, if corrected, would significantly boost Wales's placing in the PISA rankings?

Nick Timothy: I shared several hours twice weekly with the hon. Gentleman when we served on the Employment Rights Bill Committee. His creativity in defending the indefensible was admirable in that Committee, as it is today.

On top of the things I have already listed, measures in the Bill before us will make things yet worse, including the compulsion to follow the national curriculum, which is about to be weakened by the review by Becky Francis, and the removal of freedom on pay and conditions. The Education Secretary has today failed to explain how she will meet the commitments she made to avoid cutting pay for some teachers. In addition, Ministers are granting themselves unspecified powers to direct academies in future; I think we know what that might mean.

The Bill, and the other changes introduced by this Government, are a deliberate act of ideological vandalism. Standards will fall as a result, children will suffer, and the legacy of the Education Secretary will be the provision of a case study in what does not work in education.

4.23 pm

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): This is an extremely welcome Bill that addresses some long-standing issues in social care and education. There are much-needed measures to ease the capacity pressures on fostering services by offering family group decision making and requiring all councils to publish a kinship offer. There are very welcome measures for hard-pressed families on school uniforms and free breakfast clubs. On behalf of care leavers, I am pleased to see the focus on Staying Close, which offers vital support in the transition from being in care to leaving care. It is very much a Maslow's hierarchy of needs issue: unless young people have the basics in place, it is very difficult to focus on moving forward.

In my limited time, I want to mention three measures that I am particularly pleased with. There are around 112,000 children currently being educated at home. Parents choose that route for a number of reasons, and I am comfortable that in most cases the decision to home-educate is taken with the child's best interests in mind. However, there are those who choose to home-educate when difficult questions start to be asked by concerned professionals who are in regular contact with the child. As a foster carer of 25 years, I have seen the

[John Whitby]

consequences of those families managing to avoid the spotlight for far too long by moving house, moving school and avoiding scrutiny.

The Bill is therefore immensely positive for those particularly vulnerable children. It will mean that authorities will know where children are and they can be better monitored through the creation of the register. Children going through section 47 action can have an application to be educated at home refused by the local authority. It is worth saying, however, that parents who are home-educating children with no issues have nothing to be concerned about—I heard the Secretary of State say that just yesterday.

The Bill addresses the exorbitant fees being charged by some of the large children's placement providers. I was at the national social care conference in November 2023, when, at almost every plenary debate and presentation, someone would mention the statistic that the largest 20 providers of children's placements collectively made £310 million in profit in 2021-22. That was all off the back of the taxpayer, all paid through our local authorities, and they felt it. The public have felt it as well, because there is simply less money to go around for everything else.

Derbyshire county council's spending on looked-after children rose from £44 million in 2015-16 to £110 million in 2023-24. That growth in spending is unsustainable and is diverting precious resources away from the children who are most in need of support and into the pockets of shareholders. I therefore welcome the fact that the Bill requires large children's placement providers to give regular financial information to a newly created financial oversight scheme and gives the Government the power, if necessary, to cap the profits of children's homes providers and independent fostering agencies.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

John Whitby: I cannot because I have to go to a Delegated Legislation Committee in a minute. I apologise.

I also welcome the fact that the Bill enables the creation of new local authority schools. Under the previous Government, new schools were required to be academies or free schools, and that policy was based on ideology rather than evidence. Ending that requirement will mean that when new schools are built, they can be opened by the provider best suited to meet the needs of the local community. Ending the restriction will also ensure that when schools fail, a broader range of measures can be taken to give schools the support they need to succeed.

There are a broad range of positives in the Bill. They may not realise it yet, but the future of our most vulnerable children has just become a little brighter.

4.27 pm

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): As a father of three little girls, I find much to welcome in the Bill. Part 1 speaks to improving children's social care and I particularly support the provisions on accommodation for looked-after children.

The whole country was saddened and shocked by the murder of Surrey child Sara Sharif. Sadly, there are other stories in Surrey that also need to be heard. Jennifer Chalkley, from Bookham in my constituency, started college in September 2021. She was 17 and had been diagnosed with autism and ADHD. One month later, she was dead from suicide. Last year, her coroner concluded that her death was avoidable. It had been a multi-agency failure, including a failure by the children, families and lifelong learning department at Surrey county council, according to the coroner's report,

"to ensure that Jennifer's Education, Health and Care Plan contained sufficient and updated information about...her risk of suicide".

Oskar Nash, another Surrey child with autism, was 14 when he walked on to a railway line near Egham in January 2020. Last year, his coroner concluded that his death was avoidable. Again, it was a multi-agency failure, including a failure by the children, families and lifelong learning department at Surrey county council, again, according to the coroner's report,

"To ensure that Oskar's Educational, Health and Care Plan contained sufficient...information"

about his suicidal thoughts.

Then there is Sara Sharif, who was murdered in 2023 by her father and stepmother. The executive director at the children, families and lifelong learning department at Surrey county council dismissed any accountability, saying in a statement that

"the perpetrators went to extreme lengths to conceal the truth from everyone."

There were bruises and burn marks, and reports of a child being punched all over her body. There were 15 reports over 10 years to Sara's school and to social services. How is that going to "extreme lengths" to conceal the truth from anyone?

Mr Forster: I thank my hon. Friend and all others in the House who have mentioned my constituent, Sara Sharif, today. Does he agree that the provisions in the Bill that would not just encourage but force local authorities to share that data could have saved Sara from Woking and could save vulnerable children going forward?

Chris Coghlan: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend as Sara's MP for raising the horror that has taken place. Of course, I agree that data sharing between public authorities is vital to ensure that such a case does not happen again. But it is not enough, and, alone, it will not prevent the catastrophic and systematic negligence of Surrey county council. This is the same department that had the highest number of statutory breaches relating to children reported to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman for over two years. The department covered information up from its own county council and scrutiny committee for more than 14 months, and only disclosed it when my five Liberal Democrat Surrey MP colleagues and I publicly called it out.

Surrey county council objectively contributed to the deaths of Jennifer Chalkley, Oskar Nash and Sara Sharif by ignoring existing legislation.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, especially during such a powerful and meaningful speech. One of my constituents, whom I shall refer to as Claire in order to protect her identity, is only 16 years old and has attempted to take

her own life 12 times. Her desperate mother has had to take Surrey county council to a tribunal 10 times to try to secure the appropriate educational, therapeutic and social care that she needs. Does my hon. Friend agree that, while we welcome the tightening of legislation presented in the Bill, it is only as good as the willingness and ability of schools and councils to implement it?

Chris Coghlan: I fully agree with my hon. Friend. Surrey county council failed to abide by existing legislation, so how on earth are we meant to believe that new legislation alone will be enough? I share his concerns about Claire. I know from my constituents that there are children in Surrey who are at risk right now. That is why I am speaking today.

This morning, Jennifer Chalkley's mother, Sharon, texted me to say:

"Even though you didn't get to meet Jen, her story is a powerful one and needs sharing to save other young lives. I raised Jen to be the change you want to see in the world and she's still doing this."

I replied, "She will be".

I ask the House to consider this: is this Bill alone enough to save our children's lives, or does the children, families and lifelong learning department at Surrey county council also need root and branch reform immediately?

4.33 pm

Sarah Smith (Hyndburn) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Dorking and Horley (Chris Coghlan) for his moving contribution.

Members on the Opposition Benches should be ashamed to defend the status quo. The current system has seen one third of young people being failed. They leave the system feeling like failures because they have not achieved the basic qualifications of a decent GCSE in English and maths to be able to progress with their lives. We have the unhappiest young people in the OECD, and when we speak to young people, they tell us that their experience in the education system is a significant contributor to that feeling of unhappiness, and the mental health crisis that they face.

The legacy of the previous Government is that home education, which has only recently been properly counted year on year, has risen in the last 12 months from 92,000 to 112,000, but post covid, it has probably doubled or tripled. That reflects the fact that the system is not working for far too many parents, because it is not inclusive and does not meet their needs, and the changes to the curriculum have limited young people, who have different abilities, being able to prove their strengths and be valued in the classroom. That is not to mention the failures in SEND, and the urgent change that we know that we need to meet the significant support needs of some young people.

I challenge the defence of the existing system made by my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh). The huge improvements in London are not just based on academisation. We can look at evidence such as the research that was done following the London Challenge strategy. Multiple factors contributed to the great gains that London made, but when we have tried to replicate them outside London, in genuinely the most deprived parts of this country, we have not seen the same gains. I have seen academy trust after academy trust take on a failing school, with the

most vulnerable children in our country, and fail to make the improvements that it desperately deserves. That is why we need to think differently and bring forward new reforms to make a genuine difference in communities that do not have the other advantages that somewhere like London does.

My experience of tackling educational disadvantage in the most disadvantaged communities is that, when we take a place-based approach, the reality of competition incentivises schools in some parts of an area to off-roll and not be inclusive, because if they want to seek an outstanding rating from Ofsted, the best way to do that is to get rid of the more difficult children. If they just implement the Michaela approach, children with autism and other more complex needs do not thrive in the same way within those structures and requirements. Parents therefore have to take them out of the school, either because they see their child's mental health issues and choose to, or because the school forces them to do so. That has to change, which is why I welcome the reforms that the Government are bringing forward.

The evidence shows that education is the primary determinant of where children fall on the income distribution relative to their parents. That is why I truly believe that education needs to be put back at the heart of our national life, as the Bill provides for, if we are to ensure that barriers to opportunity are broken down for all. The Bill takes a huge step towards that, and I am proud that children's interests are being returned to the heart of Government policy. That is why I am proud to support the Bill.

4.37 pm

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): Ensuring the safety and success of children in our schools is one of the most important responsibilities that we have as policymakers. By extending regulations and inspections to include more schools, we are creating a safer environment for our children and giving them the best chance to thrive. The Bill introduces improved analysis of school facilities, particularly for children with special educational needs and disabilities, which is a much-needed measure. The changes will ensure that every child has access to an environment where they can learn and grow, in safety and in comfort. However, while these measures are welcome, it is equally important that we ensure that the current system, as well as any future one, is both effective and efficient. It is vital that schools, teachers and most importantly children are not left waiting for the resources and support that they need.

The case of Dorset Studio school, which serves not just my constituents in West Dorset but students across the county, illustrates the urgent need for the system to deliver results quickly. Dorset Studio school provides exceptional support for students, but especially for the 52% of its pupils with special educational needs—three times the national average. The quality of the education that the pupils receive is despite the fact that the school operates in facilities that are not fit for purpose. It has no hall, no canteen and no specialist teaching areas. The split campus layout and cramped classrooms make it impossible to provide the individualised support that children need, particularly those with physical disabilities.

In February 2023, funding for the school's new campus was approved. The project was set to merge its two sites into one modern campus. However, since then, progress

[Edward Morello]

has stalled, with delays in releasing the funds from the Treasury and the Department for Education. The Bill will extend the checks necessary for safeguarding our children to more schools, but we must be mindful of delays and how they negatively impact those we are trying to protect.

The Bill rightly emphasises the importance of inspections and approvals to ensure that school standards are met. However, it is equally important that the existing system is streamlined to avoid unnecessary delays. Our children, especially those with special educational needs, deserve learning environments that are safe, supportive and conducive to their success. I urge the Government to ensure that funding for projects such as Dorset Studio school is released without delay, even as the Bill seeks to improve the system itself. These children deserve better.

4.40 pm

Matt Bishop (Forest of Dean) (Lab): The Bill is a landmark piece of legislation that promises to transform the lives of children across England. It is a testament to the Government's unwavering commitment to the safeguarding and welfare of children. I welcome it as an opportunity to ensure that every child, regardless of their background, has access to the support, protection and education they deserve.

Following my earlier policing career and before entering this place, I worked as an education welfare officer in a large secondary school in the Forest of Dean. I saw at first hand the impact of a disrupted education. The covid-19 pandemic only exacerbated those challenges, and more and more children are missing school for a number of reasons. Vulnerable students were hit hardest, further deepening existing inequalities felt within the education system. The disruption to their education was not just academic, though; it poses pastoral problems. We have a system where parents can choose to home-educate without any checks or scrutiny, and that can lead to a crisis of safeguarding as children are often unaccounted for during this time. Let me be clear: I am not saying that home education and every single school absence are safeguarding concerns, but having dealt with some horrific safeguarding cases in my previous careers, I am sure the House will agree that even one safeguarding case is one too many and that we should all be doing something to ensure the safety of our children.

Currently, there is no legal requirement for parents to inform local authorities if their child is being home-schooled, and that lack of oversight leaves children at risk as their needs and safety may be overlooked. The Bill aims to address those oversights by introducing a requirement for children educated outside of school to be registered with local authorities.

Graham Stuart: Can the hon. Member give a single case of a home-educated child being harmed who was not already known to social services? Again and again, it is a failure of social services when notified, not the absence of a burdensome register for parents, who often home-educate their children out of desperation.

Matt Bishop: During my previous careers in the police and in education, there were cases. I will not say individual names in the House, but I am more than happy to liaise with the right hon. Member and his colleagues outside the Chamber about cases I have dealt with.

Mr Forster: Does the hon. Member agree that the case of Sara Sharif showed that her father and stepmother used this home-schooling loophole to withdraw her from school because signs were being noticed, and that this new legislation could have protected her and should protect others?

Matt Bishop: I wholeheartedly agree, and that is exactly what I have dealt with over many years before joining this place.

The Bill aims to address the oversights by introducing that requirement for children educated outside of school to be registered with the local authorities. That simple step will ensure better tracking and safeguarding of children, helping us guarantee that all children, especially those educated outside of traditional systems, are accounted for and supported. From now on, no child will be forgotten, invisible or left behind.

It is also right that we acknowledge the invaluable role of kinship carers. Many children in kinship care face unique challenges, including with their mental health and emotional support needs. However, not all children in kinship care arrangements receive the same support as children in formal care. In fact, a 2019 report found that 16% of local authorities either lacked a kinship care policy or had outdated ones. That is not good enough for kinship carers or children in kinship care.

The Bill will ensure that kinship care is legally defined, and that local authorities publish a comprehensive and up-to-date local offer and provide carers with essential information about financial assistance, and about health, education and wellbeing services. That will go some way towards levelling the playing field, and will ensure consistency in the support available to kinship carers and children across the country.

The Bill is more than just a set of policies. It is a commitment to the protection, education and wellbeing of our children. By prioritising the mental, emotional and educational needs of children, we are laying the foundations for a future in which every child can succeed, regardless of their circumstances. I urge all Members to support the Bill, and to work together to ensure that every child has the opportunity they deserve to thrive.

4.45 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Having been a secondary school teacher before I became an MP, I congratulate the Government on bringing forward legislation that once again puts children at the heart of what we in this place want to achieve. The Every Child Matters initiative was introduced nearly two decades ago.

My party and I welcome many things in this Bill, but we believe that it could go even further. It was clear from discussions with the National Association of Head Teachers in Bath and North East Somerset that local authorities need further responsibility for admissions. I am pleased that local authorities will have greater powers to direct admission to maintained schools and academies when children need places. However, if the local authority has responsibility for admissions, it should have the powers of an admission authority. I welcome the introduction of a register for children not in school. We Liberal Democrats support the policy that all new teachers in state-funded primary and secondary schools should have, or be working towards, qualified teacher status.

That is a crucial step in upholding the quality of education, and we Liberal Democrats have been calling for it for a long time.

I am a little more sceptical on the core pay and conditions framework. Teachers deserve a system that values their dedication equally, no matter where they work. The Bill promises something that we can all support: a single framework for teachers' pay and conditions—one set of rules applied consistently across Government-maintained schools and academies. That sounds fair, and most academies already follow the framework. However, the Department for Education has stated:

"Before requiring academies to comply with the framework we will ask the School Teachers' Review Body to consider additional flexibilities within the statutory framework to make it most effective for all schools."

If academies decide to opt out, teachers working just a few streets apart could find themselves on vastly different pay scales, with different benefits and working hours, simply because their schools made different choices. There could be a postcode lottery when it comes to teachers' pay.

The impact does not stop there. National benefits, such as the teachers' pension scheme, which rely on widespread participation to remain viable, could be put at risk. If too many academies decide that the framework is too costly and leave it, the system could unravel, jeopardising the financial security of teachers across the country. We must build an education system in which every teacher is treated fairly and equally, regardless of the type of school that they work in—that is a critical issue of fairness—and I urge the Government to ensure that that happens.

Let me turn to the declining mental health of our children and young people. There is no mention in the Bill of having a dedicated qualified mental health professional in every school—a policy that we Liberal Democrats have been championing for a long time. Around 50% of mental illness begins to manifest before the age of 14, so support in primary and secondary schools is key. A dedicated mental health professional in every school would ensure that all children and parents had someone they could turn to for help.

There are many aspects of the Bill that we Liberal Democrats support. However, I urge the Government to ensure that there is a single framework for teachers' pay and conditions across Government-maintained schools and academies. I also hope that they will join the Liberal Democrats in advocating for a mental health professional in every school—and for the extension of free school meals for children, which we have mentioned before.

4.49 pm

Michelle Welsh (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): I am proud to speak on this Bill. Children growing up in our country deserve the best possible start in life. Where a person is born should not determine their future, but after 14 years of Conservative government, not all children have the same opportunity to succeed. During those 14 years, the very notions of early intervention, diverse educational pathways and early years priorities were eroded. I know that, because I was working on the frontline. I saw what happened, and the damage that was done.

The number of children living in poverty in the UK has risen by over 8% since 2014. In my constituency of Sherwood Forest, one in five children live in poverty; across the east midlands, the number is almost one in four. That is simply outrageous. Children deserve better. That is why I am pleased to support the Bill; it puts children and their wellbeing and safety back at the heart of the Government's decision making, where they belong. I am proud that the Bill seeks to improve safeguarding and protection for children throughout the education system. Make no mistake: this is the single biggest piece of child protection legislation in a generation, and to suggest otherwise shows a total lack of understanding and no real knowledge of how children's protection services work today.

Another element of the Bill that I am really proud to see is the roll-out of free breakfast clubs in primary schools. A child's experience at school massively impacts their future, and when children go hungry at school, they are more likely to fall behind their peers. I am a school governor and a mother, and I know from all my friends who are teachers that children turn up to school who have not been fed, or with empty lunchboxes. I have friends who regularly pick up meal deals from the local Tesco to feed children at their school. That is what 14 years of Conservative government have done to the poorest and most vulnerable children in our country. There are so many benefits to providing free breakfast clubs in primary schools, including improved literacy, numeracy and cognitive functioning. It allows children to fully participate and learn during lessons. It gives all children a better start to the day, and a better start in life.

Despite the talk of education improving under the last Government, sadly we hear the same old story: only 8.9% of the most deprived children reach level 3 in both reading and maths, compared with 27% of the least deprived children, and those who receive free school meals are less likely to attain a level 5 in those subjects than those who do not. Some 33% of students from non-selective state schools have at least five good GCSEs; for students attending selective state schools, that figure rises drastically to 92%. It is time we closed this gap for good for the most deprived children in our society. I will be relentless in that pursuit for the children living in my constituency of Sherwood Forest.

4.53 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Having consistently advocated for victims of the rape gangs scandal in my part of West Yorkshire—I have raised the subject more than 40 times in this place since being elected—I want to focus on that issue in the short time I have been allocated to speak today. It is over two decades since the Labour MP Ann Cryer, my predecessor, first brought the issue to the House. Unfortunately, we seem to be repeating the mistakes of the past today. It is deeply concerning to me that right hon. and hon. Members on the Government Benches plan to vote against the call in the amendment for a national rape gangs inquiry.

Last night, the safeguarding Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips)—told the public that a national inquiry is not needed because local inquiries are more effective at bringing about change. However, just minutes after she made those remarks,

[*Robbie Moore*]

local leaders in Bradford once again rejected my long-standing calls for a full local inquiry into rape gangs across Keighley and the wider Bradford district, arguing that it would be too expensive. That same local authority has spent more than £40 million of public money on an empty music venue in the heart of Bradford. This is a complete and utter dereliction of duty by local leaders. More importantly, it demonstrates what I have been trying to say on this issue for years: every time I have brought up this issue at national level, it is referred back down to local government, but every time I have taken the prospect of an inquiry down to the local level, the suggestion is blocked by local leaders, and I am told that this is a national problem. There has been a complete vacuum of accountability in the system over the past two decades.

Sir Gavin Williamson: How many of the people involved have been held accountable, lost their job or had action taken against them?

Robbie Moore: Nobody has, and that is exactly why I have been advocating for a local inquiry across the Bradford district—for far too long. A report of 50 pages that looked at five children who had been sexually exploited in the Bradford district was released in 2020. It acknowledged that there had been mistakes, but nobody was held to account.

The amendment rightly tabled by the Leader of the Opposition is important because it tackles systematic problems and will end this vacuum of accountability once and for all. Convictions should follow a national inquiry that focuses on rape gangs and child sexual exploitation. When local leaders refuse their duty and ignore the concerns of local victims, it is only right that the Government step in. Ultimately, this is not about party politics, but about the difference between right and wrong. For too long, at all levels of the British state—in national and local government—all those with safeguarding responsibilities have failed to do the right thing.

There are children and families out there—I know them; I have met them in my constituency—who have suffered abuse that is unspeakable. They want the world to know the depths to which this scandal reaches. They fear, as I do, that the scale of gang rape and child sexual exploitation across the Bradford district will dwarf that in Rotherham. They want an end to this accountability vacuum. On behalf of my constituents across Keighley and indeed the wider Bradford district, I urge everyone in the House to vote with their conscience, stand up for what is right, do the right thing, and vote for a national rape gangs inquiry.

4.58 pm

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): I welcome the Bill, and I will talk about the difference that it will make to children living in poverty in my constituency of Stockton North. First, however, I remind the House of the words of Dame Rachel de Souza, the Children's Commissioner for England, who said that too many of our services are failing. We heard powerful testimony from the hon. Member for Dorking and Horley (Chris Coghlan), who described the tragic consequences of those failings. We also heard the expert words of my

hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), whose recommendations on multi-agency teams and the unique identifier will make a difference in ensuring that no children fall through the cracks and that this legislation keeps children safe.

The Bill will also drive forward equality of opportunity. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Frith) the prediction that breakfast club measures will save families £450, but for many families in Stockton North, rather than saving £450, the measures will simply ensure that a child goes to school with a breakfast.

We have heard from many Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) and for Stroud (Dr Opher), and the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), about the benefits of automatic enrolment for free school meals. As someone who grew up eligible for free school meals but never accessed them, I can say that that would definitely make a difference to children in my constituency, and I encourage the Government to look at that. I commend Stockton-on-Tees borough council for conducting a trial in that area.

The scale of the challenge of child poverty in my constituency is enormous. Figures from the North East Child Poverty Commission indicate that child poverty has increased by 20% over the last decade, and that one in three children in my area now live in poverty. It is heartbreaking to see signs in local community centres asking for donations of basic essentials such as soap or toothpaste for children who attend events there, or security tags on infant milk formula, which is one of the items most stolen from local supermarkets. When a parent steals infant milk formula it is because they have a hungry baby at home.

I admire the optimism of the Father of the House who spoke earlier about the possibility of a future Conservative Government, but babies, children and young people in my constituency do not have time to wait for that. I encourage Members to support the Bill, which will benefit children and families such as those in Stockton North, where recently I met young men, young fathers, who were striving for the dignity of stable employment and the opportunity to earn a decent wage to support their families. They will have heard today that this Government are on the side of working-class families, and I have made clear my commitment to every child and young person in Stockton North. Together we can break the link between background and opportunity, creating a better future for all children in Stockton, Billingham and Norton.

5.1 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Very little of the Bill applies to Northern Ireland other than clause 56, so perhaps when she sums up the debate, the Minister will explain what legislation will be subject to regulation in this House if she so decides. Having said that, I wish to comment on the Bill because, having the privilege of representing a part of the United Kingdom that consistently registers high educational standards, I want the same for the rest of the country to which I belong. I understand, of course, that there will always be people who fall through the bars and do not do as well in the education system, but it is important that a structure is in place that ensures the best for everyone.

One concern about the Bill is that a structure that has been in place for two decades, and used under successive Governments of different hues, will now be dismantled because of some ideological reasons that the Government have. I imagine I will not have time in this short speech to go into those issues, but I hope that they will be teased out and properly considered during scrutiny of the Bill.

Secondly, there has been limited consultation on home schooling, and there are real fears from people who educate their children at home about the impact the Bill might have. Much has been made of the fact that, if the Bill does not pass, children will not be safeguarded, but the fact of the matter is that there has always been legislation to safeguard children. As the hon. Member for Dorking and Horley (Chris Coghlan) pointed out, even with legislation in place there were still failures by the police, local authorities, social services and local councils to carry out the safeguarding that was available to them in law.

My final point is that we cannot have a Bill on children's wellbeing, and at the same time ignore the controversy out there among the public as a result of our renewed exposure to the terrible events where Pakistani rape gangs have tortured, intimidated and abused young girls. Yet we have turned a blind eye to it.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): Does the right hon. Member agree that a national inquiry into child sexual exploitation focused on grooming gangs is not only essential for justice for the innocent victims affected but would play a crucial role in societal healing in the UK, and that failing to initiate such an inquiry will leave a stain on the Government, hinder transparency and obstruct the full truth?

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Member is absolutely right. Of course, we will be, and have been, accused of having our own political agenda, wanting to stir up racism, marching to Musk's drum and everything else, but the demand at the end of the amendment is one that every decent person should wish to support, because it would restore the trust that people have lost in seeing how this issue has been handled.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): I spent seven years managing a team of barristers on a public inquiry, and I have some insight into the benefits and limitations of public inquiries. Does the right hon. Member really think that wrecking the Bill would lead to a single perpetrator being brought to justice or protect a single child from these despicable crimes?

Sammy Wilson: First, supporting the amendment does not wreck the Bill. [*Interruption.*] Secondly, there is a misconception that if we do not support the Bill, no action will be taken. There is plenty of legislation under which to take the action at present; it is simply a case of doing it and giving people the assurance that it is being done. Also, the public inquiry would ensure that those who think they can hide, deny and cover up would finally be exposed, because the House was willing to take them on and expose what has happened. That is why it is so important.

We cannot allow the situation to prevail. We know that this issue is far more widespread than was ever thought. There have been denials. Indeed, I remember

the previous Member for Telford raising this issue time and again in the last Parliament and being shouted down. At that stage, although she was providing the evidence—this is what we need to expose—the leader of the Telford council was saying, “There is no need to tell the Home Office and no need for an inquiry.” Now, of course, we know what happened in Telford.

Restoring trust in politicians and the system is what a public inquiry would do. It would not have to lead to no action being taken in the meantime. I listened to the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion)—I have great admiration for her, because she was prepared to stand up even when it meant abuse from some of her own party members—who argued that to have an inquiry would delay justice being done. As I have said, I do not believe that that is the case. An inquiry would not mean that we would stop taking action—of course, we could still take action—but it would lead to the full facts being known, those involved being exposed and action taken against them to ensure that it does not happen again. I tell the House that the longer people think that these things can be covered up and hidden and attention diverted, the less they will be prepared to do the job that they are meant to do, and we will have vulnerable people being exploited continually without the protection that they deserve.

5.8 pm

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): The very real and transformational merits of the Bill are clear. Measures on branded uniforms and free breakfast clubs will help families in Southampton Itchen and put money back in their pockets. Registering children who are not in school and having a unique number for every child will help multiple agencies to safeguard our children and work better together, more importantly.

Having already dealt with the Tory legacy of endless teacher strikes, Labour's Bill will start valuing qualified teachers once again who inspire our next generation, and will be paying them consistently. The Bill will also ensure that all children, regardless of school model or structure, can be inspired by a refreshed curriculum that sets them up for life. Any Member who has worked in education or social care will not recognise the fanciful picture of the Tories' record. If it was so rosy, they may want to reflect on why they are now on the Opposition Benches. Let us have a bit of honesty: what they left was inadequate funding and crumbling buildings. They were against fully qualified teachers; there were endless strikes over pay; and recruitment and retention were a complete disaster. Those are the inconvenient facts that some of them want to avoid, all because of an obsession with buzzwords and structures, not with children's outcomes. They talk about educational vandalism, but they are guilty of it.

I want to focus my remaining comments on measures that will make a difference to a group whose voices are often not heard enough in this debate: children and young people who have experienced being in care. We have had the excellent independent review of children's social care, carried out by my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), which, we should remember, was commissioned by the last Conservative Government and then, inexplicably and unforgivably, put on the shelf and ignored. In that report, my hon. Friend warned that without a significant

[Darren Paffey]

change of course, the number of children in care would exceed 100,000 in this country. This Bill can and must be that change of course.

Ensuring that local authorities offer family group conferencing is hugely welcome and will give opportunities for the children's voices to be heard when planning potentially life-changing interventions, to ensure that those are the best possible changes. For some, living with a member of extended family will turn their life around, so I welcome the legal recognition of kinship care. That will ensure solid support and a home closer to their support networks for the 153,000 children and young people in that situation. I ask that the Minister perhaps reflects on the extent to which children and young people's voices will be heard in designing those measures.

Support for care leavers is crucial, so I welcome the extension of the Staying Close support. It represents a transition to independence and steps to get decent housing and vital services for those young people, but it is not just a theory or a programme—it is already working. When I was cabinet member for children's services in Southampton, we introduced it three years ago. It has been an enormous success in terms of the quality of support and the outcomes for young people.

In a rare moment of cross-party agreement, I reflect on the comments of the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith). I agree that the supported lodgings scheme from the Home for Good and Safe Families charities is worth looking at. The results are impressive in terms of safety, good relationships, confidence and being more likely to be in education, employment and training.

The goal of this important Bill is to ensure opportunities for every child and young person—not just those in the Tories' preferred model of school, but 100% of schoolchildren: a safe start for every one of them. The Government who take this seriously are those who act on it. That is this Labour Government—not posturing like the Opposition, or ideologically wrecking it, but taking action so that children can thrive in life.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Before I call the next Member, I am imposing a three-minute time limit.

5.12 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): Let me starting by saying how much I welcome the Bill, as an important step in strengthening the role of education and multi-agency safeguarding arrangements, so that we can better identify and protect vulnerable children. A headteacher in my constituency reached out to me and said:

“Children do disclose to teachers, particularly in primary school. We spend so many hours with children—we are often the voice for the child. Parents can often tell authorities things that are not true.”

The tragic death of Sara Sharif in my county of Surrey serves as a sobering reminder of the current weaknesses in the system and the consequences of not getting such an important piece of legislation right for children at risk of neglect and abuse.

As a school governor for eight years, with responsibility for safeguarding, I understand a little of the load that teachers carry that keeps them awake at night. One headteacher told me:

“Unless you have spent sleepless nights worrying about a child, knocked on a door in the hope that a child is still alive, you don't understand.”

As a governor during covid, when all our vulnerable children were stuck at home initially, I understand that.

The Bill is a welcome first step, but there is much more the Government can do to support children and young people. I welcome the creation of a register of children not in school, but I believe the Bill should go further. As it stands, parents will no longer have an automatic right to home-educate if their child is subject to a child protection investigation or under a child protection plan. However, I am not clear whether these provisions would have protected children such as Sara, who was previously known to social services but was not at the time of her death. I would be grateful if the Minister could clarify whether, in order to protect such children, the Bill will ensure that parents will not have an automatic right to home-educate if their child has also had a history of child protection investigation or a child protection plan, rather than if the investigation or plan is live at the time. I am also pleased with the provision compelling local authorities to share information. It took one school locally four years to track down a family who had withdrawn their child, and that family then went missing.

I support calls for the Bill to make provision for a dedicated, qualified mental health professional in every school, ensuring that all children and parents have someone they can turn to for help. In Surrey there are almost 7,000 children on mental health waiting lists, waiting for an average of eight months. Providing a dedicated mental health practitioner in these schools would be highly effective in reaching large numbers of children and young people.

Finally, I am disappointed that the Bill falls short on tackling the problem of SEND education in England, as these children are at particular risk of being forced out of the schools system and into potentially much more vulnerable situations. There are 1,800 children in Surrey missing school because of a lack of provision—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I call Sally Jameson.

5.16 pm

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): All children deserve the very best start in life, and I will vote in favour of this Bill today on behalf of all the children in Doncaster Central who deserve just that. Along with many other measures, I am pleased that the Bill acknowledges the immense challenges faced by care leavers and care-experienced children, and that it will set a higher bar for councils to support young people who have left care. In Doncaster there were 542 looked-after children in 2023. The Bill's success will be measured by their outcomes, which have long been ignored.

As a former prison officer, I have worked with many care leavers in the prisons system and heard their experiences, some of which were harrowing. The statistics speak for themselves: it is estimated that around 50% of

young offenders in custody and around 29% of the entire prison population are care-experienced. That fact is most sobering when highlighting the significant failures in the current system, and it serves as a reminder to us all that change must come. It signifies a consistent and enduring failure to support young people in the care system, and tells our young people that if they need to be cared for by the state, they are less likely to lead a positive and stable adult life. It is the taxpayer, frankly, who is picking up the bill. According to research from Become, the number of young care leavers aged between 18 and 20 approaching local authorities as homeless has increased by 54% over the past five years, and they are nine times more likely to face homelessness than other young people.

I wholeheartedly welcome the measures in the Bill that strengthen arrangements to support and assist care leavers in their transition to adulthood, and I hope that legislating for local authorities to publish a full local care offer for care leavers will offer much-needed clarity and direction, which can often be uncertain. I hope the Government will consider the recommendations from Barnardo's, which suggest that the Bill should extend corporate parenting principles to a greater range of public bodies, including the Home Office, the police and healthcare providers.

Finally, I want to refer to something that has been raised by a number of colleagues today: the disgusting and excessive profiteering that exists in children's social care. People and private providers who have no business in this area have been charging extortionate rates to councils and taxpayers while delivering the appalling outcomes that I discussed earlier.

Change is much needed, and I am pleased that the Bill is finally here. It has been a long time coming for many vulnerable children across the country, and I look forward to seeing it progress.

5.19 pm

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): As has been highlighted on the Opposition Benches, English education has been a success story. We have trusted schools to get on with the job, and academies and new free schools enjoy the freedom to run themselves, pay their teachers more and improve their curriculum. Ending central Government and local government micromanagement has put power into the hands of people who know best: school leaders and teachers. And it has worked: English schools have soared up the global rankings under the Conservatives.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman talks about putting power into teachers' hands. Is he aware of the number of teachers who have been so radicalised by the Conservatives' reforms that they now surround me on the Labour Benches?

Peter Fortune: Well, the figures speak for themselves. As was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy), who has morphed into a Whip at the moment, English schools have soared up the rankings. If we look at the recent PISA league tables, we see that English education is now ranked seventh-best for maths and ninth for reading and science. That is up from 21st, 19th and 11th respectively in 2009. Meanwhile, education in Scotland and Wales under the

SNP and Labour, where schools were not granted those freedoms, has stagnated and slumped in various global rankings, so much so that some of them have withdrawn altogether from some of those rankings.

I want to focus on one problematic element of the Bill, which was raised by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse). The Government's proposals would strip academies of the power to pay teachers more, award performance, and attract and retain talented people. I understand that at least two schools in my constituency pay teachers more than the national pay scales: Oaklands primary in Biggin Hill and Pickhurst primary in Hayes. Nearby, the Harris primary academy in Shortlands and many more schools in Bromley also choose to pay teachers more. The Bill will strip academies of that power, cutting teachers' pay and weakening schools. In any other industry, pay reflects performance. When vacancies cannot be filled, pay rises to attract talent. That is why schools should be able to vary from national pay scales. School leaders should be able to pay good teachers more and respond to the local jobs market. Instead, the Government want to wind the clock back and empower Whitehall, not schools.

The Government are so eager to be doom-mongers to justify their ideological policies that they risk wrecking a decade of progress. Who will benefit? It is not the teachers or the children, so why are they doing it? I am not even sure that those on the Government Front Bench know, but what we do know is that the Bill will destabilise years of progress and damage the future opportunities of young people across Bromley and Biggin Hill, and right across the nation.

5.22 pm

Mr Connor Rand (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): In a week where much has been said about protecting children, it is great to see the Government acting on the safety and wellbeing of children.

For children to be safe, they need to be visible. A situation where children can fall off the radar of the authorities tasked with protecting them is clearly unacceptable, but we know it happens. We know that in a minority of cases, children can be taken out of school and out of the protections that schools provide, and come to harm. That is why introducing a register of children not in school is such an important and common-sense measure: it is right that parents will no longer have an automatic right to home-educate if their child is subject to a child protection investigation; it is right that local authorities can identify children not in school, in order to ensure that they are safe; and it is right to introduce a unique identity number for children that facilitates information sharing by the services charged with protecting them. As the Children's Commissioner said, writing these landmark measures into law will be "of huge significance for any child currently at risk of harm in this country".

I am proud that the Government are so swiftly taking forward such measures.

My final point on home education is that it is important to recognise that the steep increase in home-schooling is in part the result of parents of children with special educational needs feeling that those needs are not being met in mainstream education. It is therefore vital that the Bill runs parallel to the important work that the

[Mr Connor Rand]

Government have already started at the Budget to reform and invest in a SEND system that has been severely neglected for too many years.

Many other Members have talked of the huge importance of every child having a legal right of access to a breakfast club, and of the action we are taking to ensure that school uniforms are affordable. Nothing damages child wellbeing more than child poverty. Of course there is much more to do, but, alongside the Government's child poverty strategy, these are concrete steps that will make a real difference to families in my constituency and across the country. Taking action to make a difference, changing things instead of calling for yet another review, serious work instead of parroting nonsense on social media, and passing legislation instead of scoring points—this is serious work from a Government who understand the importance of ensuring that all our children have the best possible start in life.

5.25 pm

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to stand here today and talk about a Bill that delivers on the Government's mission to break down barriers to opportunity. There are two aspects that I particularly welcome. The first is the potential profit cap, which will enable the Secretary of State to cap the profits of non-local authority Ofsted-registered providers of children's homes, foster agencies and supported accommodation. There are areas throughout the country, including mine, where the cost of placing children in private sector residential social care is eye-wateringly high. I regularly meet officers from my local authority, Nottinghamshire county council, and the costs that they are incurring to meet the needs of children's welfare have been described by the council's former Conservative leader, Ben Bradley, as "rinsing" local authority finances.

I think it important for us to ensure that private companies are not making excessive profits at the expense of other public sector services, and I therefore welcome the numerous measures in the Bill that aim to rebalance the children's social care placements market and drive down those excessive profits made by some unscrupulous private providers, together with the demand for full financial transparency from those organisations and the potential for the creation of regional care co-operatives.

Luke Myer: I previously oversaw children's social care in local government. Does my hon. Friend agree that the introduction of those co-operatives will make a huge difference not only to local government finances, but to our ability to ensure that children grow up safe and happy?

Steve Yemm: Indeed; I see the positive benefit of both those developments. We will be able to rebalance spending across local authority budgets and provide a significantly better and measurable standard of care at the same time.

The second aspect of the Bill that I particularly welcome is the introduction of free breakfast clubs in every primary school, which will have a significant and positive impact on families in Mansfield, in particular by helping with the cost of living and supporting parents who are having to juggle work commitments. However,

I am especially motivated to support the Bill because of some of the harrowing stories that I have heard from constituents. Numerous teachers in Mansfield, some of them visibly distressed and upset, have told me that they have used their own money to buy food for children who have turned up to school with empty stomachs—young children who are so hungry that they cannot concentrate on their studies. It is not that those children are unloved or wilfully neglected; many come from loving families with both parents working all hours to provide for them, which leaves precious little time for the preparation of a meal before school.

This Bill clearly drives home Labour's mission to break down barriers to opportunity, and I will be voting for it proudly on behalf of all the children and families in my area who will benefit from it.

5.29 pm

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): This Bill is a landmark piece of legislation that not only demonstrates ambition but takes tangible action to keep children safe, improve educational standards and make families better off. Like many of us here, I got into politics to improve the life chances of children in my community and to make it a reality that, regardless of someone's background or circumstances, the only ceiling on their potential is their talent and your determination, so I am delighted to see the Government bring forward this Bill, which begins the work of breaking down barriers to opportunity for our children. As anyone who has been involved in our schools or who has read any of the academic evidence on the subject will know, that starts with a full stomach at the beginning of the day, which breakfast clubs deliver. They help with attention span and cognitive performance, and they give parents greater flexibility to earn during their working hours.

Strengthening the law to set out a specific number of branded school uniform items is an important step in the right direction, and I hope we will go further in due course.

Chris Vince: My hon. Friend mentions free breakfast clubs and the removal of some branded school uniform items. We talk about uniforms costing up to £500, but does he agree that the figure is bigger than that for parents who have multiple children at the same school?

Andrew Cooper: I absolutely agree. Primary school children, who typically wear polo shirts, need five days' worth, plus PE kit. This measure will make an enormous difference. Although it has been great to see organisations such as the Winsford Uniform Exchange in my constituency grow and provide people with lower-cost and greener alternatives, bringing costs down for families is absolutely the right priority. The measures on breakfast clubs and school uniforms may be the two most visible in the Bill, and I hope that they will be part of the Government's lasting legacy of supporting all children to achieve and thrive.

The Bill covers a vast array of measures across the spectrum of children's social care and schools policy, as we have discussed this afternoon. I will focus my comments predominantly on the schools side, although I want to take a moment to say something about the single unique identifier for children. In Lord Laming's report on the death of Victoria Climbié in 2000, he recommended

that the Government explore the safeguarding benefits of a national children's database—effectively a single unique identifier—to address poor communication and data sharing between agencies.

In report after case after report after case, the issue of weak multidisciplinary working continues to arise. The measure proposed in this Bill, alongside the clarification of the legal basis for information sharing and the creation of multi-agency child protection teams, will undoubtedly help, but they are the start of the story, not the end. The success of this measure will be in ensuring that the single unique identifier is consistently captured in reforming working practices so that information sharing is part of the culture, and in making it clear that local authority boundaries, health authority boundaries, police authority boundaries and, in my part of the world, national boundaries are not a barrier to good safeguarding practice, which has become more important as children travel further to appropriate education or care settings.

I want to cover the reforms that the Bill makes to academies in the minute or so that I have left. I am not ideological about the academy system. I have seen multi-academy trusts that provide an outstanding level of support for their schools; equally, I have seen MATs that have not worked and that have provided local leaders with few levers to push for improvements on behalf of their communities. The reality is that the previous Government left us with a school system that has become increasingly fragmented and lacks coherence at local, regional and national levels.

The governance model is rarely the key determinant of whether a school will provide good outcomes for children; as someone once said, this is about standards, not structures. On that basis, many of the reforms proposed in the Bill are entirely sensible, such as the requirement to teach the national curriculum, the requirement to employ qualified teachers, and giving the schools adjudicator the final say on admission numbers. All of these measures will get us closer to some consistency and common standards across the sector.

I will leave it there. I just want to say that this legislation—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. There is a time limit.

5.33 pm

David Baines (St Helens North) (Lab): I am both a former teacher and a former council leader, and I speak on behalf of many of my former colleagues when I say that this Bill is welcome and will make a difference to children across St Helens North. It will also make a positive difference to the ability of those who work in education and other services to protect and support children and young people. That is why I will vote for the Bill and cannot support the Opposition's wrecking amendment.

Breaking down barriers to opportunity is a key Government mission, and one that, in my experience, has been vital to all those who choose to work with children and young people. When I was council leader in St Helens, we made giving every child the best possible start in life the council's No. 1 priority, and I learned that partnership working is key. Together, we were able to take children's services from inadequate

when I became leader to good and outstanding. I warmly welcome the Bill's measures to encourage data sharing and multi-agency work in all councils across the country.

Members on both sides of the House should welcome the Bill's measures to improve child protection and safeguarding, to improve support for children in care and care leavers, and to introduce better regulation of the children's home sector.

On wider issues under the Bill's scope, I warmly welcome the concrete measures to put money back in families' pockets at a time when we know things are difficult for many. Practical measures such as limiting the number of branded items of school uniform and introducing free breakfast clubs in primary schools could save families in St Helens North £450 a year. Perhaps more importantly, these measures will make sure that children can start each day with a full stomach, healthier, happier and ready to learn.

I also want to see higher standards and more opportunities for every child in every school. I say this not just from my professional background and interest but, more importantly, as a parent. I am pleased to see this running right through the Bill and through everything the Secretary of State and Education Ministers have said since taking office. This means putting qualified, expert teachers at the front of every classroom, including in academies, and developing a new national curriculum to ensure that young people are ready for work and ready for life.

However, as I mentioned earlier, I have no doubt that the most important aspects of this Bill will ensure that children and young people are safe at home and at school. This Bill is the biggest upgrade in child protection in a generation, and it should be something we can all support.

I finish by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), who spoke so passionately and clearly about child protection, as well as the importance of voting for the Bill today and implementing the Jay inquiry's recommendations as soon as possible. This should be something on which we can all agree.

5.36 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I welcome this wide-ranging Bill that focuses on the important issues of keeping children safe, providing more support for children in care, addressing child poverty, raising educational standards and returning local authorities to the centre of school place planning.

Given the cost of living, and with child poverty as high as 32% in my constituency, I welcome the clauses on limiting school uniform costs. Parents are too often forced to prioritise their school choices based on the cost of the school uniform, which is a form of selection. If the Hounslow school my sons attended could limit branded kit to an iron-on blazer badge, a tie and a PE shirt, so that the rest could be bought at supermarkets, why cannot all schools do this? I also welcome the introduction of breakfast clubs in all schools.

As a former local councillor and lead member for children, I am pleased that the Government are giving powers back to local authorities on place planning and proposals for new schools—a right removed by the

[*Ruth Cadbury*]

Conservative Government after 2010. The opening, closing, growth, contraction and entry criteria of any school have a direct effect on neighbouring schools and local transport services. Furthermore, the cynical practice of off-rolling by schools that are trying to up their exam scores is another example of why the local authority role is so important. I welcome the relevant clauses in this Bill.

Finally, every school in Hounslow is rated good or outstanding. I am sorry to disagree slightly with my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh), who is no longer in the Chamber, but in my experience the single biggest factor in successfully turning around a failing school is not its governance structure but the inspirational leadership of a great headteacher.

To address the recruitment and retention challenge in school leadership, future great school leaders need to be identified and supported before they burn out and leave the profession mid-career, as I fear many are doing. My question to Ministers is whether the workforce and finance challenges inherited from the previous Government will be addressed to deliver the full potential of this excellent Bill.

5.39 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Children growing up in our country, and in my city of Portsmouth, deserve the very best start in life and nothing less. As a teacher for 24 years, I have seen the best in education and unfortunately, under the Conservatives, the very worst. The best journey in life is not easy, and it is shameful that under the last Government we saw the scrapping of Sure Start and Building Schools for the Future, the narrowing of the curriculum, a failure to meet targets in recruitment and retention, a lack of joined-up services in education and health, a lack of child protection, the ignoring of inquiry recommendations and an Ofsted system that is not fit for purpose. In short, there was a disregard for our children's future.

In just six months, this Government have introduced a Bill that seeks to reverse that situation. The Bill is innovative, and importantly, in drafting the measures the Government have listened to the voices of charities, professionals, parents, children and young people. The Bill provides an opportunity to truly transform lives. The measures will take action in the wake of appalling and tragic child abuse cases; create a register of children not in school; save families in Portsmouth potentially £500 a year per child through the creation of breakfast clubs; cap branded uniform; introduce national pay and conditions for teachers; and ensure that kinship carers have clear guidance. I could continue with this list because the Bill sets out so many more actions to benefit the wellbeing of children, but I want to concentrate on home-schooling.

The relationship between many families and local authorities on home-schooling is adversarial and characterised by mistrust. That relationship must be reset. The register is vital to stop children slipping through the cracks. It is crucial that home-schooling is a clear choice and, when chosen, is not a battle between parents and local authorities. Parents must not feel they

have no choice but to home-school because the previous Government dismantled SEND provision in our schools, or because children have been offloaded by some schools. We must ensure that every family who make the decision to home-school are doing so freely and with the best interests of their children at the forefront. I believe the children's register will help provide data and understanding. The new duty for mainstream and alternative provision schools to co-operate with local authorities on place planning will help ensure a plan for adequate school places, which I know will be welcomed in my constituency.

The Bill is the single biggest piece of child protection legislation, and it is what the children in my city and our country deserve.

5.42 pm

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I welcome the announcement by the Chancellor that the money raised from VAT on private schools will fund breakfast clubs for pupils in my constituency, giving them the best start to the day. I want to highlight Mattersey primary school in my constituency, a rural school that is one of the smallest in the country, with only 38 pupils, 51% of whom, shockingly, receive pupil premium funding. The school currently runs a breakfast club for £1 a day and has applied to be an early adopter of the free breakfast club scheme. As the policy is rolled out across the country, I urge the Secretary of State to learn from the school how it runs its breakfast club, and I invite her to visit the school.

For some children, home-schooling has been valuable and enabled them to be educated in surroundings where they feel safe and can achieve their very best. However, there are huge dangers and, in some cases, home-schooling has become a vehicle that have put vulnerable children at greater risk. I am concerned by seeing too many children out in the streets during school hours, with parents caught up in a generational cycle of benefit dependency and their children missing out on school because they are supposedly being home-schooled. At an early age, those children are already facing a future of living on benefits and in a black economy culture. That concern is amplified where children are being hidden, whether they are like Sara Sharif or part of extreme religious groups controlling children's lives and welfare, in which the victims of abuse are silenced. All of us can and should support the Government's recommendations for oversight and registration in this sector.

The previous MP for Bassetlaw, Lord Mann, gave evidence on behalf of more than 30 people to Professor Jay's inquiry. He and my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) were the only MPs who did that. In Bassetlaw, I sat and listened to victims of child abuse. This is a crisis in all communities. The idea that the Government should give action against one kind of child abuse priority is obscene and dangerous. Anyone who does not understand that should read the report by the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse. There is a lot of unfinished business; this is not just about legislation. My office has been working since the moment I was elected to get my constituent Terry Lodge, who was enslaved as a child in a foundry, the compensation that Nottinghamshire county council has accepted that it will pay for his loss of childhood, but which is still to be paid out. That was in our country—in white, rural England. Child abuse is in every corner of

our country. I am not prepared to wait three or four more years for action, and neither should the victims or the survivors be required to wait any longer.

I want to read out a message from a survivor that I have received while sitting in the Chamber:

"I'm guessing victims of abuse want to be believed, to see justice served and to hold the people who knew and didn't help accountable, not listen to another multi-million pound inquiry lasting 7 years, which points out the obvious."

I will end by saying that instead of making this issue into a political football, I will listen to my constituents—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I call Dave Robertson.

5.45 pm

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I am still quite a new Member, but over the last months, we have been privileged to see the best of the House; its support for the fight in Ukraine and the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill spring to mind. Even in this afternoon's debate, the speeches from the hon. Member for Dorking and Horley (Chris Coghlan) and the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Sir Julian Smith) were excellent contributions that show the House in an exceptional light. Unfortunately, this evening, I may yet see the disappointing spectacle of Members choosing to vote against measures to protect children, solely so that they can make a political statement. That is a significant concern. I reconfirm to any Members on the Opposition Benches who are thinking of supporting the amendment that if they do, they are voting to block the Bill; they are declining to give it a Second Reading. In blocking the Bill, they are blocking the single child identifier and the register of children not in school, which are steps that the Government are taking to protect vulnerable children.

We have heard from some Members that they want to call for an inquiry in certain places. They can still do that if the Bill passes Second Reading, as I hope it will. There is nothing in the Bill to stop such inquiries, or to prevent people from continuing to campaign for them. By voting against the Bill—to support the amendment is to vote against the Bill—they are voting against measures to protect children to make a political point. That is not acting in the great traditions of this place.

I could talk for over an hour on this matter, but I have a minute left, so I will touch on school uniform. Around three years ago, alongside business, schools and the community, I set up Lichfield Back to School Bank, a uniform recycling scheme. Last year, we supported more than 120 families, and around 4% of the city's school pupils picked up a uniform from us. We prevented six tonnes of carbon emissions through that alone. That, however, is not the real reason why I am so proud of that. Many parents I speak to talk about the weight lifted off their shoulders when they are able to access a school uniform, because the costs are so high and such a concern. A parent came over at the end of the event with a couple of bags of things to put on their kids, which helped them out with costs. They were reduced to tears. They had been feeling pressure; they had been looking ahead to the cost and did not know how they would meet it. Being able to get that stuff at no cost released that pressure valve.

I hope that story stays with me for a very long time. Those are the stories we need to focus on—stories of the real-world impact in our constituencies.

5.48 pm

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I want to make the House aware that my partner works for a teacher training provider.

The Bill represents a real step towards closing the gaps through which children are falling. Parents and carers in Birmingham Northfield will welcome the measures in the Bill to help keep the cost of school uniforms down, to extend free breakfast clubs to every primary school, and to tackle the profiteering by the pirates of the high needs, which my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Steve Yemm) spoke about so convincingly.

I agree with Members from across the House who have said that beyond the Bill, we need to see progress in this Parliament on our children's happiness and on SEND. We cannot lose sight of the fact that the new duty to report safeguarding concerns will protect children and save lives. May I say how welcome it is to see in the Bill the name of the safeguarding Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips)? Child abuse is the cruellest and most cowardly of crimes, and few have done as much as her to champion victims. The public hounding that we have seen in the past week, which some Members of this House have failed to condemn, represents a threat to public safety, a disgrace to public life and an insult to survivors of grooming and abuse.

Some of my constituents will take an interest in the vote on the Conservative amendment as well as on the Bill. I want to be clear: the amendment is a lengthy hodgepodge of objections to the Bill, and I fundamentally disagree with it; it would have the effect of delaying action on safeguarding.

I conclude by saying to Opposition Front Benchers that if they continue with the opportunistic weaponising of the most sensitive and serious issues, which we have learned over the last day has extended to using this matter as a fundraising opportunity, they will remain in opposition and will deserve to do so.

5.50 pm

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): It is a privilege to be called to speak in this debate. I will focus my remarks on the impact of this Bill on schools and parents in my constituency. However, first I pay tribute to the family of Holly Newton from my constituency, and to Northumberland Domestic Abuse Services, which campaigns tirelessly to provide protection for victims and young people in my constituency.

This landmark legislation is a return to grown-up, sensible, solution-based politics and policymaking, which for 14 years this country has been denied. Unfortunately, all too often, parents in my constituency find the cost of uniform prohibitive. That additional cost places a burden on families who should be focused on sending their children to what will be, and in many cases are, genuinely world-class schools in my constituency. I was privileged to visit Acomb first school, Longhorsley Church of England first school and Hexham middle school before Christmas. I will be off on another school visit on Friday.

[Joe Morris]

The Bill is merely the start for this child-focused and child-centric Government. I am incredibly grateful to the Secretary of State for joining me on a pre-election visit to the middle school in Corbridge, where we met children and students, and where soon I will be pounding the pavements and knocking on doors for our excellent council candidate. I am probably the first Member to mention the local elections in 2025, so I guess it is now open season.

Smaller schools across my constituency have really suffered from a county council that is not focused enough on the needs of parents and children. There is a lack of school transport provision, which I have spoken about in this place, and a lack of SEND provision, which I hear about at almost every single surgery that I hold. Genuine concerns have also been raised about Bellingham middle school. Parents and residents feel that the Conservative-run administration at Northumberland County Hall has simply abandoned the school and is content to let it wither. I am sure that there are some good-intentioned Conservative councillors at County Hall who would object to that, but that is the view of the community.

In the 30 seconds that I have left, I would like to pay tribute to those on the Government Front Bench for their relentless focus on addressing the practical needs of my constituents. I thank the Secretary of State and the ministerial team for the time that they have given to me and to other Members from the north-east, for their focus on improving the outcomes for schools, and for the time that they have spent speaking about the challenges of smaller schools in my Northumberland constituency. I have finished my speech with five seconds to spare.

5.53 pm

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): Childhood is a precious thing. It can shape us or break us. Too many childhoods have been stolen—by poverty, abusers and the inaction of the previous Government. In Britain today, 3.5 million children are growing up in absolute poverty. More are being placed in unregistered children's homes, and it is estimated by the Education Policy Institute that 300,000 children are missing from the education system. Although Opposition Members seem to have woken up to the evils of child abuse and exploitation, they cannot deny that their lack of care and urgency on these issues has made our children more vulnerable. Their failure to act has created an environment in which it is estimated that almost half a million children experience some sort of sexual abuse in this country every year, and their failure to implement a single recommendation from the Jay report has made it easier for groomers in every corner of our country to continue to rob our children of their childhood, their future and their dignity. That is the cost of the previous Government's do-nothing approach to child abuse, and they should be ashamed.

The previous Government's failure has also seen councils struggle to cover the spiralling cost of placements. In Croydon, where I am privileged to be an MP, the council has had to cough up almost £87 million to cover the cost of child services. With 31% of children there growing up in the shadow of poverty, Croydon's young people have been failed by the inaction of the previous

Government. It is time to end the previous Government's addiction to failing our children, and support the Bill. The Bill cuts the cost of sending children to school by introducing free breakfast clubs and tackling the cost of school uniforms. It also prevents vulnerable children from falling through the cracks by bringing in a register of children who are educated from home, and introducing a unique identifier, so that children are visible across the system.

The Bill is the single biggest piece of child protection legislation in a generation. A vote against it is a vote against children's safety, their childhoods and their future. It is shameful that, even in opposition, Conservative Members continue to drag their feet on child protection, continue to fail our children, and continue to put the interests of their party before the best interests of our country. Unlike the Opposition, we will not turn our back on our children, we will not accept failure, and we will finally put the wellbeing of our children first.

5.56 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Children growing up in Bournemouth deserve the best start in life—nothing less. Whoever you are, and wherever you come from, you should be able to go as far as your talents take you, and those talents should be rigorously, systematically and compassionately nourished for everyone. I would not be here but for the teachers of my childhood. I thank Alan Garner and Christine Moore—it feels really weird to name them in full. I thank Mr Garner and Mrs Moore, who did so much to enable me to get here. They stayed late in the classroom so that I could have a safe, warm place to do my homework. They inspired me to do better when circumstances told me that I could not, so thank you to them.

The reality is that for many children, opportunity is too often limited, and their background can have a decisive impact on the life that they can build. I welcome the Bill because it will help every child to achieve and thrive at a school with excellent teaching and high standards. It will focus on disadvantaged children and those with special educational needs and disabilities. In Bournemouth, we have a particularly significant SEND crisis. The Bill will get children ready for the school day by providing free breakfast clubs in primary schools. I want to give a shout-out to Pokesdown community primary school. Chef Russ and Ali Bayliss are two fantastic leaders providing nutritious breakfasts for young children. The Bill will ease the financial burden on parents by limiting the number of branded uniform items. I am particularly pleased about that, because only this week, I was contacted by a constituent, Richard Merghani, based in Southbourne, who raised concerns about the cost of school uniforms. I welcome the Government's proposal; estimates show that it could save parents over £50 per child on the back-to-school shop.

I want to bring the voice of constituents and local educational experts into this debate. I am thinking of David Naylor, who was the headteacher at Stourfield junior school for 11 years; Lyn Gaudreau, who has been a senior principal adviser to Dorset local authority education authority; Simon Adorian, a former headteacher; Patrick Connolly, a former educational professional; and Caroline Ellis, a nursery manager. They have informed everything that I would have said, if I had longer than four minutes, and everything that I will contribute as

the Bill develops and passes through the Commons. I thank them for their expertise, and for what they contribute. We should really be listening to them, not Conservative Members, who have disgraced themselves in this debate and in recent days.

I thank the Government Front Benchers for bringing forward the Bill and prioritising children so early in the life of this Labour Government. It feels like unfinished business. The last Labour Government did so much to improve the lot of children and young people; we are just picking up where they left off. I look forward to seeing the Bill progress, and to the future of all our children being so much brighter.

5.59 pm

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): There are a few reasons why I put my head above the parapet and entered frontline politics and stepped from the classroom benches as a former deputy headteacher to the green Benches of this House to represent families in Wolverhampton North East, but none are closer to my heart than this: under the previous Conservative Government, we lost sight of what is most important—that children are happy, healthy and safe. I have seen the best of what education can offer. I have worked with brilliant teachers and hard-working, dedicated support staff. I have worked in schools where 50% of students were disadvantaged—schools that exceeded expectations despite the odds. But I have also seen the deep and growing divides in our education system—divides that do not stop at the school gate but spill out into wider society, and the Bill will take important steps to address them.

Educational inequality is the defining challenge of our time. Disadvantaged students have always faced hurdles, but, in recent years, those hurdles have become insurmountable for many, inflamed by the pandemic and the cost of living crisis. Schools in Wolverhampton and Willenhall and across the country are battling a worrying rise in school absences. One in five children are now regularly absent, and that figure is rising to one in four. Some 158,000 children nationally are severely absent, missing over half of their school sessions. The scale of the crisis is staggering. It is the equivalent of our Wolves' Molineux stadium being filled five times over with children who have missed half the school year. Those children are not just missing lessons; they are missing the foundation for a better future.

The Bill takes the important steps to reverse that tide. By strengthening safeguarding for every child, it protects the most vulnerable. By easing the financial burden on families, including cutting costs of school uniforms, and by committing to free breakfast clubs in every primary school, it tackles a simple yet profound barrier to attendance. By creating a truly child-centred social care system and ending extortionate profit making in children's care, it ensures that the needs of the child come first. I have dedicated my life to education, and I wholeheartedly support the Bill. It is not just a step in the right direction; it is a foundation for the future.

6.2 pm

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): For the record, my wife is employed as a special educational needs co-ordinator in a local authority school in the London borough of Bexley.

I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the Bill on aspects relating to looked-after children and academies. On looked-after children, the Bill would make a series of changes on accommodation, as colleagues have commented, which include increasing Ofsted oversight of organisations that operate multiple children's homes or independent fostering agencies, introducing a financial oversight regime for certain independent agencies and children's home providers, and allowing the Secretary of State to cap the profits of children's home providers and independent fostering agencies.

From my years as a local councillor, I know how badly those changes are needed. My local authority in Bexley, like many others, has struggled to control those areas with regulation and struggled with the financial aspects. Last year, we saw the largest children's services overspend of any London borough as a result of those issues. I therefore welcome the measures to limit the profits of specified non-local authority, Ofsted-registered social providers of children's homes and fostering agencies, which have continually raised their costs far above inflation to profit from the taxpayer and from the care costs of our most vulnerable children.

I welcome the changes in clauses 47 to 50 to school admission arrangements, requiring schools and local authorities to co-operate to manage admissions and giving local authorities the power to direct academy schools to admit pupils. In my local authority, we have schools where over 50% of the children do not live in our borough because of the admission arrangements that our academy schools have decided to put in place. In a borough where 79% of schools have been academised, we rely on their good will as to how many pupils they will admit each year from our local authority and how those applicants will be prioritised. That has resulted in the same Conservative councillors who cheer-led the roll-out of academies openly complaining to me and colleagues that they no longer have control over admissions criteria.

Today, we have the opportunity to give this landmark legislation its Second Reading. It will improve education standards and strengthen protections for the most vulnerable children in Bexleyheath and Crayford and across our country. It will drive high and rising standards in schools through common-sense reform, and it will prevent children from falling through the cracks by introducing landmark reforms to safeguard children's social care.

The Bill is the single biggest piece of child protection legislation in a generation. A vote for the amendment is a vote against the Bill and against the safety of our children, their childhoods and their futures. I urge all Members to vote with me and the Government and to give the Bill its Second Reading.

6.5 pm

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I wish to move away from the distracting, insulting and dangerous politics of some Conservative Members and return to the key principles of the Bill, which will reduce the pervasive inequality in our society. It will drive high standards throughout our education and care systems so that every child can achieve and thrive, no matter where and into what circumstances they were born.

In Aylesbury, 15% of children live in absolute poverty. That reality is sometimes lost in the perception of Buckinghamshire as a wealthy place, which masks

[*Laura Kyrke-Smith*]

significant inequality. I will highlight three ways in which the Bill will make a difference to children and families struggling in my constituency.

First, I support the Bill's commitment to delivering high and rising standards for every child in school by establishing core national standards from which all schools can build and innovate. When I visit schools, I meet children full of hope and ambition and teachers determined to drive that ambition forward. However, budgets are stretched, staff recruitment is tough and standards across the sector are uneven. The Bill contains very welcome measures such as putting more qualified teachers in classrooms, and updating the pay and conditions framework for teachers, including in schools in areas with high levels of deprivation. I have heard great ideas in my constituency about the curriculum and assessment review, including from some brilliant pupils I spoke to at the Grange school. I look forward to seeing the outcomes of that review later this year.

Secondly, I am pleased that the Bill will support the many parents and carers who are struggling with the cost of living. Free breakfast clubs will save parents and carers £450 per child, and limiting the number of branded school uniform items will save £50 per child in the back-to-school shop. One Broughton resident told me that seven branded items cost them £280—seven items that their child will grow out of or lose before they knew it. They said that the costs are

“crippling families, even more so in this current climate, and it is only getting worse.”

We have heard those concerns, and are acting on them through the Bill.

Thirdly, I am so pleased that the Bill will ensure that fewer children fall through the cracks in the education system. I welcome in particular the measures to introduce a register of children out of school, with a unique number for every child. I recently spoke to a headteacher in Aylesbury about the scandal she calls “ghost children”—children who disappear from schools and social services. In Buckinghamshire alone, the number of children missing education has doubled in the past two years. The measures in the Bill will ensure that the most vulnerable children cannot be withdrawn from school until it is confirmed that it is in their best interests and there is suitable alternative education for them.

This is a deeply principled Bill that we can all take pride in. It is a realisation of one of our most important ambitions for this country: that no matter who someone is or the circumstances they were born into, the Government will support them to make a success of their life.

6.8 pm

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): I welcome the measures that the Secretary of State has set out to drive up standards and protect children. It is just a shame that so much cynical politics has been played in relation to the Bill in recent days.

One of the best parts of being a new MP has been visiting local schools, from Yew Tree primary to Tividale Hall, and seeing smiling faces excited about the future. However, it is a sad reality that children in my constituency and across the country have been let down—not by their hard-working teachers, but by a system in which

public services have crumbled, rising special educational needs and disabilities have gone unmet, and children have slipped through the cracks.

A central mission of this Labour Government is to break down barriers to opportunity. Every child deserves the best start in life, but we know that the playing field is not level, and we joined the Labour party to do something about it. In Sandwell, 37% of local children are eligible for free school meals, compared with 27% of children nationally. Education should be the springboard that breaks the link between the circumstances of a person's birth and what they can achieve, but something is not working.

In Sandwell, we do not recognise the rosy picture painted by the Conservative party—that everything is great in schools and all teachers love their jobs. The 18-year-olds who left sixth form in July 2024 have spent their whole school career under a Conservative Administration, and in that time, GCSE and A-level attainment has completely stagnated in my area of Sandwell. Anyone who looked at a graph of level 2 and level 3 attainment locally under the previous Labour Government would have seen a steady climb. Children did better and better in school, but over the period of the last Conservative Government, that progress has ground to a complete halt. We have been stuck in a situation where the proportion of children in Sandwell attaining two A-levels or equivalent is 10 percentage points below the national average. That is not because children in Sandwell are not as smart as children elsewhere; it is because the system has not been working.

This Bill will put more qualified teachers in front of classes, create a cutting-edge national curriculum, and give all schools the flexibility to recruit and retain the expert teachers our children need. We want our children to go to school in the right headspace—with hungry minds, not hungry bellies. That is exactly what this Bill will do, with breakfast clubs that will improve concentration, behaviour and attendance and help family finances.

I also want to touch on something that is at the heart of this Bill: the fact that it is the single biggest piece of child protection legislation in a generation. While some are playing politics, we are taking action, introducing a register of children not in school and a unique number for every child and implementing multi-agency child protection teams. In the past six months, the Labour Government have done more for children than the Conservatives did in 14 years. This Bill protects children—their childhoods and their futures—and breaks down barriers to opportunity. That is why I will be proud to vote for it today.

6.11 pm

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): I rise to speak to three points: free breakfast clubs, the clauses dealing with kinship care, and—having spent the past seven years managing a team of barristers on a public inquiry—the Opposition wrecking amendment.

First, we all know that children who have breakfast perform better at learning, and—a bit like me—can be better behaved as well. However, with the cost of living crisis left to us by the last Government, far too many parents struggle to ensure that children get regular morning meals. Having been a chair of governors at a nursery school, I am keenly aware that the greatest

impact we can make on a person's life chances comes in the early years. The Derby Poverty Commission is exploring with partners how free breakfast clubs can be provided in nursery schools in Derby, and is looking to work with businesses to fund that. I hope the Government will keep under review whether in future the positive impact of free breakfast clubs can be extended to nursery schools as well as primary schools.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is also important to look at breakfast clubs for certain secondary schools, to make sure that teenagers are also getting the breakfast that they deserve and need for learning?

Catherine Atkinson: The evidence is clear on the real benefits that breakfast can give our children and young people.

Secondly, the Bill requires local authorities to consider kinship care before they issue proceedings for a child to go into the care system. Avoiding taking children into care when it is safe to do so leads to far better outcomes. In the first decade of my practice as a barrister, I spent significant time in family care proceedings; I was frustrated by delays then, and the situation now is far worse. Delay and limbo are hugely damaging to vulnerable children and their families.

Finally, I am hugely disappointed by the Opposition wrecking amendment. I have spent the past seven years on a public inquiry, and I have some insight into the benefits and limitations of those inquiries. The Opposition's newly discovered conviction that a further inquiry on child sexual exploitation is needed and their attempts to hijack this Bill smack of political point scoring and headline grabbing, and the suggestions we have heard that a further inquiry could be done in a year are wholly unrealistic. Inquiries can make recommendations, but they cannot implement them; that is our job, and wrecking this Bill will not achieve that.

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): My hon. Friend has highlighted the landmark nature of this Bill. Many of the most historically significant measures for improving child welfare and wellbeing have enjoyed cross-party support, and I am thinking here of the Children Act 1908, the—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Interventions really do have to be brief. A lot of Members still wish to get in, and we are on a very tight time limit. The hon. Lady has already earned an additional minute of injury time, and I regret that I will not get all Members in if we continue to have long interventions.

Catherine Atkinson: I just wish to say that, nearly a decade after the national independent inquiry into child sexual abuse was set up, it is high time that the victims who so bravely gave evidence see action.

6.15 pm

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I welcome this Bill because, at its heart, it puts children first. It does so in a number of ways, and I want to start by talking about children who are out of school. Parents have the right to decide whether their child is in school, and I support that principle absolutely, but the state has

a duty to ensure that every child has a high-quality education. It is a fundamental right, not a privilege, and one that we must protect. This Bill addresses a fundamental shift that has taken place over the last few years. In Hartlepool, the number of children being home-schooled has increased by 370% since the pandemic. In the last year alone, the number of parents refusing to engage with the local authority in anything other than writing has nearly doubled. Added to that, the number of children missing from education, which is a completely separate measure, is now 200 in Hartlepool. We have a duty to protect those children and their education. The vast majority of parents do a phenomenal job in those circumstances, but we have to accept the truth that there are times when they do not, and this Bill protects those children.

A second issue that I think is really important is exclusions. In Hartlepool we now have about 85 permanent exclusions—the capacity of the local authority to support such children is 28—and it is expected to double over the next year, without action. This is that action, and giving local authorities increased power to ensure that exclusions do not happen when they are not necessary will help local authorities such as Hartlepool.

I want to finish by reflecting on the support that the Bill gives to families. We have heard about free breakfasts in every primary school. I joined the Labour party because, as a young teaching assistant, I saw children coming to school hungry every day. To be able to stand here today, knowing that I am about to vote to make sure that no primary school child ever faces that again is a proud moment for me, indeed.

On school uniforms, I want to point to the level of need that exists in Hartlepool. Natalie Frankland, an amazing individual who runs the charity Hartlepool ReLoved Clothing, has distributed 40,000 pieces of free school uniform in just two and a half years. That is the level of need that exists, and this Bill helps those families. It puts money back into their pockets—£500 a year minimum, and more if they have more than one child—and it protects children and supports families. It is what the Tories are trying to wreck tonight, and it is what we are going to support.

6.18 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): When I thought about why I was going to support this Bill and why it is so important to me, I thought about the number of children I have taught over the years. The sad reality is that of all the young people we teach, the vast majority we do not get the opportunity to see again; we do not see them grow up or what they do. I am proud to say that I have bumped into a few of my former students over the years because some of them have gone into the teaching profession. One of them was actually in the “Death in Paradise” Christmas special the year before last, and one of them is the star striker for Harlow Town football club. There is the other side of that, however, and I once had the horrible experience of looking at the front page of the local newspaper and seeing two of my former students who had tragically died in a car accident, but perhaps I should not have mentioned that.

I realised why I was so passionate about teaching and supporting young people, and that is because I feel so passionate, as many of my colleagues do, about ensuring

[Chris Vince]

that young people have the best possible opportunities to fulfil their potential. I truly believe that every young person has the potential to achieve if we give them the opportunity.

I also believe that it is less about the type of school that young people go to, and more about the broad range of subjects that they can study, so that every young person has the opportunity to star.

As I said earlier, I have some genuine concerns—I do not want to get into the politics of this, but I am concerned about the number of young people who have fallen through the gaps, certainly recently, and I welcome measures in the Bill to introduce a register of students who are not in school. I also welcome news about a single unique identifier. Wearing my hat as chair of the all-party group for young carers and young adult carers, I mention the importance of ensuring that young carers form part of that unique identifier and part of teacher training—just a little ask.

I also recognise the importance of improving communication and multi-discipline teams—I have a lot less time than I thought. I also wish to mention free breakfast clubs, and the school uniform savings that will benefit parents and young people in my constituency who are struggling because of the cost of living crisis. I genuinely believe that that measure will help them, as it is an issue that definitely comes up in my constituency.

6.20 pm

Mr Mark Sowards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): With time so short, I will focus on the three areas that my constituents raise with me most frequently. We have heard about them today. First is the introduction of free breakfast clubs, which is the latest in a long line of manifesto commitments that we have kept over the past six months, despite objections and comments from Conservative Members. That provision will guarantee that no child has to start the day hungry, and it also creates an extra 30 minutes of childcare, which will allow parents to be flexible with their working arrangements.

The second area—my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) spoke passionately about this—is the limit that the Bill places on the number of branded items that a school can require a parent to purchase for their child. That limit will now be three. This is exactly the right thing to do. School uniform can get expensive as it is, and no child or parent should be deterred from choosing a school because of the cost of its uniform.

The third issue relates to children who are not in school. The Bill will create a register of children who are not in school, so that local authorities will be in a position to ensure that all children are being taught in a suitable environment. This is excellent work; it is a minimum standard, and it is absolutely required.

I have been approached by constituents who home-school, and they do an excellent job. They wanted to share some concerns with me, which I promised I would raise with the relevant Minister, so I hope she will excuse me as I take the opportunity to do that now. First, when the registers are introduced, what safeguards will be in place to ensure that hackers, and others who try to breach the security of the local authority, cannot

access them? Of course, the answers might not be forthcoming today; they might come in Committee. Secondly, what will be done to ensure that all local authorities take the same approach to the registers, so that we do not get hundreds of different approaches to collecting data? Finally, what clarification can the Minister provide on what interventions from the council will take place when it deems it appropriate to do so? What will the guidance look like?

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) has already stated clearly, in a non-party political way, why we must not vote for the Conservatives' wrecking amendment today. She has already been through the national inquiry that has taken place, which has already produced 20 recommendations, none of which have been implemented. The time for words is over; the time for action is now. That is why I am proud to vote for the Bill today.

6.23 pm

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Bill and the Secretary of State's commitment to tackling the SEND crisis in our schools—a crisis that developed over more than a decade of neglect, and which will not be resolved overnight. The Bill's proposal to introduce a duty for local authorities to keep a register of children who are not in school is causing concern among families with children who have special educational needs and disabilities in my constituency. The concern is based not on the Bill but on the battles that parents find themselves fighting in order to ensure that their child's needs are met.

As a survivor of the SEND jungle, I understand the state of perpetual worry that families live with, and I understand that they are fearful that the introduction of a register may result in increased pressure from the local authority for their child to attend school without the support they need. Last year saw a 40% increase in the number of requests for education, health and care plans in Scarborough and Whitby from the previous year, and almost 30% of decisions on EHCPs took six months or longer, leaving children without the support they needed while waiting. If a child does receive an EHCP, parents often feel that the provision offered does not correspond to their needs as there is a shortage of key professionals and funding is often pooled rather than used for the one-to-one support that they really need.

In my experience, parents do not take the decision to withdraw their child from school lightly. One constituent has faced fines for her son's non-attendance that she cannot afford to pay and problems at work because he is at home. Another constituent, Karen, who runs the marvellous charity Closer Communities in Scarborough, which supports families in this situation, has struggled to get appropriate support for her own son. Karen, who was a senior manager in the NHS, was forced to put her own career on hold, which inevitably had financial implications for her family.

Withdrawing a child from school is not easy and can have a major impact on a family. Most would prefer for their child to be educated in a mainstream school, where they get the support they need. I am proud that the Government are working hard to ensure that that happens in the future with more targeted mainstream provision. I hope that the Secretary of State can reassure parents

like those I have described that they have nothing to fear from the legislation. Will she consider whether the register could be used to distinguish between parents who home-school by choice and those who do so because they have no choice?

6.26 pm

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): Every child deserves the best possible start in life, no matter their background or where they live, and this Bill is a vital step towards ensuring that for every child in the country. The Bill addresses ordinary families' concerns, cuts the cost of the basics needed for school and ensures that every child has what they need to learn. The Bill is also the most significant piece of child protection legislation in a generation. It will protect the most vulnerable children and families.

The introduction of free school breakfast clubs in all primary schools is a significant step in supporting children's learning and wellbeing. I am also pleased to see the cap on branded uniform items included in the legislation. Too often the cost of uniforms is prohibitive. In Morecambe and Lunesdale we have huge uniform hubs to try to deal with that problem.

Additionally, the Bill's steps to regulate home education are crucial to stop vulnerable children from falling through the cracks. The introduction of a register for children not in school will ensure greater safeguards, particularly for those who may be at risk of exploitation or neglect. It is vital that every child has access to safe, high-quality education regardless of where that is given.

I also welcome measures to crack down on illegal schools, where unfortunately we have seen many serious cases of abuse, including sexual abuse. Measures in the Bill will protect children from both poor schooling and the use of illegal schools to terrorise children. I put on record my thanks to Humanists UK, which has led a campaign for over a decade to crack down on illegal schools and has shone a light on some really horrific practices.

I thank the Secretary of State for giving me and other MPs time to discuss the details of the Bill, including definitions of what "full time" means in the legislation, and a potential concern I have about opening up a gap to avoid the cap on faith selection. With little time left, I want to put forward a personal view on faith selection in schools: it should have no place in state-funded education. It is social selection by proxy and, at the very least, I would like to see a firm commitment to keeping the 50% cap on all schools.

6.29 pm

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): Giving children the very best start in life—a safe start where they have every opportunity to achieve their full potential—is vital. This Bill supports that. It introduces more robust measures to help keep children safe and it raises standards and opportunities in schools, so that children receive a high-quality, holistic education. It covers a huge number of areas—more than I could meaningfully address in the short time I have available—so I will focus on the national curriculum.

Introduced in 1988 by Kenneth Baker, the national curriculum is one of a handful of significant and progressive education reforms of the 1980s. Opposition Members should be more proud of it. It provides the statutory

standard for school subjects, lesson content and attainment levels for state schools in England. However, it is not compulsory for academies. That made sense when academies were introduced in the early noughties, because in communities where there were significant levels of unmet need and low aspiration, it allowed school leaders the freedom to devise programmes of learning that helped to address the acute and embedded challenges that young people in those communities faced, after the decline and lack of investment in schools during the '80s and early '90s.

By May 2010, when the last Labour Government left office, there were 203 of those academies. Now, there are over 10,000, following a significant expansion of the programme. I support the concept of academies—

Damian Hinds: Ah!

Jonathan Davies: I do support the concept of academies; they are a great legacy of the previous Government. But because those schools do not have to follow the national curriculum, some are gaming the system by not teaching a full, holistic programme of subjects. There has been a massive decline—over 50%—in the number of arts entries at GCSE since 2010. Some schools offer no art subjects at all at GCSE level. That matters for our economy and the UK's standing around the world, and for who we are as individuals, how we understand the world and how we interact with each other. I welcome the Bill's measures to provide a more holistic education to children.

I also want to speak briefly about breakfast clubs. They will be very welcome in Derbyshire, because Derbyshire county council increased the cost of school dinners by £1 last year—£150 a year—on top of what they already cost for parents. That will help with the cost of living crisis. But I ask that the Minister make sure that, as we implement this legislation—providing it goes through—we have the right checks and balances in place to ensure that local authorities such as Derbyshire, where Ofsted found serious issues with SEND, are fulfilling their statutory obligations to ensure that children who rely on home-to-school transport can access breakfast clubs.

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

6.32 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): Over the past 30 years we have had something that is quite unusual in politics: a degree of cross-party consensus about education in England. Schools in England have been improved by the magic formula of freedom plus accountability. It started in the late '80s, was accelerated after 1997 by Labour and was accelerated further under the Lib Dem-Conservative Government in 2010. And it worked: England improved not just compared with the rest of the world, but compared with Scotland and Wales, where the opposite agenda was followed—academies were banned, league tables were abandoned and a progressive curriculum was installed.

Between 2009 and 2022, England went from 21st to 7th in the PISA league table on maths, while Wales went from 29th to 27th. On science, England went from 11th to 9th, while Wales slumped from 21st to 29th. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies pointed out in a searing report titled "Major challenges for education in Wales",

[Neil O'Brien]

amazingly, disadvantaged children in England are now doing better than the average child in Wales. Earlier, the Secretary of State talked about what the Bill would do for the working class. We have seen what Labour's agenda has done for the working class in Wales.

It was a similar story in Scotland, which collapsed from 15th to 25th in maths and from 11th to 26th in science. Other comparisons tell us the same. The trends in international mathematics and science study found that from 2011 to 2023, England's rankings were all maintained or improved to become among the best in the western world. Meanwhile, what happened in Scotland and Wales? We do not know, because they withdrew from the test after bad results in 2007.

Yet despite all that evidence, the Bill in front of us today takes us backwards. Never mind the things we did—the Government are undoing the best things that the last Labour Government did. As educators have pointed out, it is totally unclear what problem Ministers think they are trying to fix, but it is clear that it will cause problems, because it takes away academy freedoms and starts rolling back the academy programme.

One important freedom that the Bill takes away is the freedom to pay more on top of the national salary scale to retain more good teachers. The biggest school trust in the country, United Learning, uses those freedoms to pay 5.6% above the figures set out in the Government's national terms. The leader of that trust, the former DFE official Sir Jon Coles, has warned that what the Government are planning will be damaging and will make it harder to retain good teachers.

Schools employing at least 20,000 teachers will be hit by the end of this freedom. Even the Government have sort of recognised the problem, saying:

"We recognise the good practice that academy trusts have developed over the years, but good practice shouldn't be limited by administrative structures."

This is bizarre. If it is good practice, why are the Government not extending those freedoms to all schools, rather than taking them away from academies? The DFE is trying to say that their new law will not affect teachers' pay. Why then are the Government passing it? What is the point of it? If it is so good, why have they told *Schools Week* that it will not apply to senior staff?

Ministers are compounding the problem by taking away freedoms over QTS. About 13,600 teachers do not have QTS at the moment, and a lot of those who enter state education without QTS—about 600 a year—go on to get it. However, the fact that teachers can join state schools without having it up front reduces the barriers to entry and makes it easier to recruit to state schools. The Treasury estimates that this policy will cost schools up to £127 million for the existing stock of teachers and £43 million for the flow of new teachers each year, but there will be no compensation for this cost.

The bill also ends academies' freedom to vary from the national curriculum. This freedom promotes genuine diversity in our schools; not all children learn in the same way, and parents can currently choose what is right for their child. It also protects educators from endless meddling by well-meaning politicians and interest groups. In Scotland, the imposition of the ironically named but disastrous "Curriculum for Excellence" has

been one of the main reasons why Scotland's schools have plummeted down the international league tables. Many schools will now have to spend a lot of time churning through Labour's brand-new curriculum to work out whether they comply. It is another move away from a culture of teacher empowerment and towards a tick-box compliance culture, and a backwards move. What problem are Ministers trying to fix here? They have admitted in a written answer that they do not even know how many schools will be affected by this policy. It is bizarre. They are leaping without even bothering to look. As well as cutting back all those other freedoms, the Bill also gives the Secretary of State a terrifying, sweeping new power to boss academies about on any subject of her choosing where she thinks a school is behaving unreasonably.

As well as taking away school freedoms and leaving us with academies in name only, the Bill also hacks back the academies programme; in doing so, it hacks back accountability, which has always been the flipside of school freedoms. In 1997, one of Labour's first moves was to publish a list of failing schools and start intervening in them. After trying other things, it became apparent that the best way to intervene was to make the schools academies and put them under new management. This Bill, of course, abolishes the academy order, under which failing local authority schools are turned into academies. The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh), in her superb speech, gave a great explanation of why abandoning this central Blair-era reform is such a mistake. Of course, the very best way to turn around a struggling school is to make it part of a strong trust. However, the Government have abolished the academy grant and the trust capacity grant that support this process. They hope instead that a bit of advice from some DFE officials will do the trick of turning around failing schools—but that centralist approach has been tried, and it failed.

The Bill takes us back to local authorities setting up new schools, which, at best, sets up a messy situation. However, I am particularly nervous about it in the context of the other measures in the Bill, which reverse the reforms of the late 1980s. Those reforms, for the first time, enabled the best schools to grow, unshackling them from local authorities, and ushered in the era of parental choice, which is itself a powerful motor for school improvement. Clause 50 gives a local authority the ability to object if good schools want to grow, or even if the academy is proposing to keep its published admission number the same. In the context of falling pupil numbers, it will be tempting for local authorities to prop up unpopular schools—particularly local authority-run ones—by sharing out the pupils from more successful schools. Rather than the normal split between a regulator and a provider, local authorities will be both. Politicians in some local authorities have never liked school freedom, and it will be very tempting for them to push down numbers in academies to protect the schools they run. Earlier, we heard the former Labour leader, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), welcoming the Bill for exactly that reason—the same reasons he welcomes it are the reasons parents are right to fear it.

The Bill is a massive step backwards. There are huge, real issues that need tackling in schools, but the Bill does not help with them and, in lots of cases, hinders them. Our reasoned amendment today makes this clear.

Dr Lauren Sullivan: Will the shadow Minister give way?

Neil O'Brien: I am pressed for time, so I will see if I can get to the hon. Lady at the end.

Our amendment is also the first opportunity that MPs will have during the Bill's proceedings to vote for a proper national inquiry into the grooming gangs. As the Bill goes through, we will seek to make further amendments to ensure that this much-needed inquiry happens. The current discussion started when Oldham asked for a national inquiry into what happened there. It did so because a local inquiry would not have the powers needed: it cannot summon witnesses, cannot take evidence under oath and cannot requisition evidence. We have already seen the two men who led the Greater Manchester local investigation resign because they were being blocked, yet the Government say no to a national inquiry and say that there should instead be local inquiries. But there have been years over which they should have happened, and they have not happened.

In many cases, the local officials are part of the problem and even part of the cover-up, so they cannot be the people to fix this. *[Interruption.]* Members are chuntering from a sedentary position, but take, for example, the case of Keighley, where my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) has been calling for an inquiry for years. *[Interruption.]* Last night, while Ministers were here saying that there should be a local inquiry, in Keighley they were blocking a local inquiry—even as they spoke. So that is not the answer.

The Government hide behind the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse. It was an important first step, but what it was not and never intended to be was a report on the grooming gangs. It barely touches on them. It looked at half a dozen—just half a dozen—places where grooming gangs have operated, but there were 40 to 50 places where grooming gangs operated, and the voices of the victims in those places have never been heard. *[Interruption.]* Having a proper national inquiry does not stop anyone getting on and implementing the recommendations of the Jay report. Indeed, one of the recommendations of the Jay report, recommendation 4, is to increase public awareness. Without a national inquiry, it is clear that we will not get to the bottom of this issue and that the people who looked the other way or covered up will not be held to account. So far, how many people in authority have been brought to justice or held to account? The answer is zero. *[Interruption.]* Tonight, we have a chance to change that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I am going to allow the shadow Minister to finish, but I will hear him. He is perfectly within his rights if he chooses not to give way.

Neil O'Brien: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Some people really do not want to hear the voices of the victims. *[Interruption.]*

Even though no one in authority has been held to account, the Government seem to think that there is nothing further to be learned. I do not think that is right. This afternoon, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), said that there should a national inquiry if victims wanted one. Victims are calling for one, so what are we waiting for?

There are real challenges that we should be facing: recruitment, discipline and attendance. Instead, we have a Bill that just takes us backwards. As one of the nation's leading educators, Sir Daniel Moynihan, said today on "World at One":

"We are worried in the sector about what the problems are that the changes are designed to fix. We can offer better pay. It's not clear why constraining that solves a problem. Why academies...should be constrained beats me...We're hoping that some of this will be amended. It would be a terrible shame if the reforms that Labour introduced over 20 years ago...were watered down."

Likewise, the Confederation of School Trusts is warning that the loss of academy freedoms proposed in the Bill risk making it

"more difficult for trusts to do the hard work of improving schools in the most challenging circumstances".

I remember what state schools were like in the '80s and '90s. In my school, it was chaotic, with loads of fights, discredited progressive teaching methods, failed kids and good teachers being ground down. *[Interruption.]* You think it is funny, but the life chances of the kids I was at school with were flushed away by your disastrous ideology. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The shadow Minister will know that I did not flush away any child's life chances. Perhaps he is bringing his remarks to a conclusion.

Neil O'Brien: I am. On a happy note, I also got to see the best of state education. I went to an amazing sixth form that benefited from the freedoms that the Conservative Government gave it. I pay tribute to the inspiring principal of that college, Kevin Conway, who helped so many kids in Huddersfield in his lifetime. I saw what state education could be. I saw the best of it. Freedom works, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I would not be here today if it did not.

I am heartbroken by the Bill. It genuinely trashes the cross-party reforms that we have had over 30 years. We can see they have worked, yet we are trashing them. I am begging Ministers—begging them—to change their minds.

6.44 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): Contrary to the doom and gloom that we have just heard, there has been a fantastic response to the Bill, and I thank all Members on both sides of the House for their contributions to what has been a largely well-informed debate. I particularly thank the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), and the spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats, the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson). Both made constructive speeches, and, while laying down issues for us to consider during our deliberations, demonstrated a real commitment to working with us on the Bill's delivery. The hon. Members for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), for Horley (Chris Coghlan), and for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) also made excellent speeches.

Today's Second Reading marks the next step in the delivery of the commitments made by the Labour party at the general election—the commitments to bring children and education back to the centre of our national conversation, to deliver high and rising standards in our education and care systems, so that every child can

[Catherine McKinnell]

achieve and thrive, to ensure that every family can count on a good local school, to give children access to qualified expert teachers, and to break down the barriers to opportunity for every child in every community. It is a significant Bill that puts children first. This is action, not words.

Let me deal briefly with the Conservative amendment. The child sexual abuse scandal is sickening. It is vital that we learn lessons from past failures, including the issues uncovered by the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, and turn that into action to protect children now. The Conservatives know that if their amendment were passed, the Bill would fall. They also know the Bill will deliver landmark reforms to safeguarding and children's social care. It is the biggest piece of child protection legislation in a generation, and we are bringing it forward to prioritise children. It will help to set up every child for the best start in life. It will protect children from the risk of abuse, it will stop vulnerable children falling through the cracks in our services, and it will deliver a core guarantee of high standards for every child's education.

I commend the measured yet powerful speeches that Members have made today about the child sexual abuse scandal. My hon. Friends the Members for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome), for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern), for Doncaster Central (Sally Jameson), for St Helens North (David Baines), for Bassetlaw (Jo White), for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) and for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson) all know that the Bill will help professionals to keep children safe. It will introduce a register of children not in school, provide for a consistent identifier for every child, and require the establishment of multi-agency child protection teams in every local authority area.

Esther McVey: Will the Minister give way?

Catherine McKinnell: If I do, I will not have much time to give credit to everyone who has spoken in the debate. I genuinely want to pay tribute to Members for the huge number of contributions made by Members from across the House.

This Government firmly believe that we must act, strengthen the law and take forward the recommendations of the independent inquiries that have already taken place, and that is why we will reject today's political opportunism. Instead of chasing headlines, we want to focus our efforts and our actions on vulnerable children.

Esther McVey: Will the Minister give way?

Catherine McKinnell: No, I will not. I have said that I will not.

I know that we are all united in our desire to ensure that the Bill works for children and young people across the country. I apologise if I am not able to respond to all the points that have been raised; there were a huge number of them, and we will have an opportunity to debate all those issues in the weeks ahead.

This legislation will provide the safe and secure foundation that all children need, and I was surprised by the tone of the shadow Secretary of State's opening remarks, in which she decried it as "educational vandalism". I know what educational vandalism looks like: children unhappy in schools, standards falling, staff undervalued,

school buildings crumbling, and special educational needs and disability systems failing on every measure. That is the Conservatives' record on education. It is shameful, and it let down a generation of our children. We are determined to turn the page.

Central to the Bill is cutting the cost of sending children to school. In our manifesto, we committed to offering breakfast clubs in every primary school; through this Bill, we will deliver those clubs, which will ensure that all children get the chance to have a soft start to the school day and are ready to learn. The Bill will also address parents' concerns about school uniforms by limiting the number of branded items, which will put money back into parents' pockets.

Many Members have spoken powerfully about the impact of poverty on children in their constituency, including my hon. Friends the Members for Bury North (Mr Frith), for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson), for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome), for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern), for Sherwood Forest (Michelle Welsh), for Stockton North (Chris McDonald), for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) and for Hartlepool (Mr Brash). All of them know that tackling child poverty will improve the life chances of our children, and today we have a chance to make that happen.

As Members have highlighted, our measures will ensure that we look again at admissions and place planning to make sure that decisions account for the needs of local communities. That is why we are introducing a duty for state schools and local authorities to co-operate on place planning and admissions, and emphasising the importance of working together to secure the best future for every child.

Graham Stuart: Will the Minister give way on that issue?

Catherine McKinnell: We have heard a lot from the right hon. Gentleman today.

Contrary to the comments made by the right hon. Members for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) and for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson), we recognise the importance of admission authorities being able to set their own published admission numbers, and of good schools being able to expand where there is local demand. There seems to have been a huge amount of misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the Bill's measures on academies. Unfortunately, I simply do not have time to refute it all today, but we are determined to drive high and rising standards right across our school system, to ensure that schools and children have the support to thrive, and to break the link between background and success. That means looking beyond the sign above the door of a school to the children within, but we cannot achieve that without quality teachers. I pay tribute to all our school workforces, who work tirelessly in the service of children and young people.

Wild claims were made today; the shadow Secretary of State asked why the Government were telling teachers that their pay is too high. At no point have we said that teachers' pay is too high; indeed, we recently implemented a 5.5% pay award for teachers. To be clear, this Bill does not seek to reduce teachers' pay. We recognise the good practice and flexibility that academies have benefited

from, and the focus of our measures is providing a core offer to all state schools while still leaving them the flexibility to innovate.

A number of Members have rightly highlighted the challenges around SEND, including my hon. Friends the Members for Hyndburn (Sarah Smith), for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Rand), and for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume). We know the challenges relating to special educational needs and disabilities. We are absolutely determined to fix the system by improving inclusivity in mainstream schools while ensuring that there are special school places for children with the most complex needs. This Bill will go some way towards supporting those aims, but it is by no means the whole picture, and we will continue to make progress on the reforms that are so desperately required.

Our priority is ensuring that the most vulnerable children do not fall off the radar of the professionals who are working to protect them. Members from across the House have rightly focused on that issue. I commend them for their very thoughtful contributions on these challenging issues, including the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Sir Julian Smith), my hon. Friends the Members for Rother Valley (Jake Richards) and for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), who must be commended for the work that he has undertaken in this area, and my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mr Sewards). There will be “children not in school” registers in every English local authority, and local authority consent will be required to home-educate children who are subject to child protection inquiries or child protection plans, or who are at special schools; that is a proportionate solution that focuses on the most vulnerable.

The Bill will strengthen multi-agency safeguarding arrangements and implement multi-agency child protection teams. We recognise that we must improve information sharing across and within agencies, and we will. The Bill will support children in the care system so that they achieve and thrive. It will keep families together, and children safe, and crack down on excessive profit-making. These are issues that I know hon. Members care very deeply about, and my hon. Friends the Members for Lowestoft (Jess Asato), for Derbyshire Dales (John Whitby), for Forest of Dean (Matt Bishop) and for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) have spoken movingly about them today.

Esther McVey: Will the Minister give way?

Catherine McKinnell: I will take the right hon. Lady's intervention.

Esther McVey: The Minister is most generous. I would like her to explain how our reasoned amendment, which would allow a national debate on this horrendous grooming, is a wrecking amendment. Given the numbers, it is not a wrecking amendment, and what she has said on the Floor of the House is not right.

Catherine McKinnell: I am not sure whether the right hon. Lady has read the amendment, which declines to give the Bill a Second Reading.

The majority of Members agree that the Bill will be crucial for safeguarding children, and I think we have dealt with the many questions understandably raised

about child sexual abuse and the truth and justice that must be secured for victims of these horrendous crimes. We had that national inquiry, we had that report, and we have the recommendations, which have been discussed at length today.

I again commend my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham for her powerful speech, and I do not think anyone would disagree with wanting to put into practice the 20 recommendations that we know will make a difference to children.

This Government are about action. The time for talk is over. We want to bring about the changes that we know will change lives, so I am grateful to hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions today.

Robbie Moore: Will the Minister give way?

Catherine McKinnell: No, but the Bill's next stages in this House will offer more opportunities for discussion.

Put simply, this Bill will provide the safe and secure foundations that all children need. It will drive high and rising standards across our schools to help every child achieve and thrive. It will contribute towards a brighter future for all our children and our country. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 111, Noes 364.

Division No. 74]

[6.57 pm]

AYES

Allister, Jim	Freeman, George
Anderson, Lee	French, Mr Louie
Anderson, Stuart (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Gagan Mohindra</i>)	Gale, rh Sir Roger
Argar, rh Edward	Glen, rh John
Atkins, rh Victoria	Grant, Helen
Bacon, Gareth	Griffith, Andrew
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi	Harris, Rebecca
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Hayes, rh Sir John
Barclay, rh Steve	Hinds, rh Damian
Bedford, Mr Peter	Holden, rh Mr Richard
Bhatti, Saqib	Hollinrake, Kevin
Blackman, Bob	Holmes, Paul
Bool, Sarah	Huddleston, Nigel
Brandreth, Aphra	Hudson, Dr Neil
Burghart, Alex	Hunt, rh Jeremy
Cartledge, James	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Chope, Sir Christopher	Jenrick, rh Robert
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Cocking, Lewis	Jopp, Lincoln
Cooper, John	Kearns, Alicia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)
Costa, Alberto	Kruger, Danny
Coutinho, rh Claire (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)	Lam, Katie
Cross, Harriet	Lamont, John
Davies, Gareth	Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Davies, Mims	Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Davis, rh David	Lopez, Julia
Dinenage, Dame Caroline	Lowe, Rupert
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver	Mak, Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Malthouse, rh Kit
Easton, Alex	Mayhew, Jerome
Evans, Dr Luke	McMurdock, James
Farage, Nigel	McVey, rh Esther
Fortune, Peter	Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Fox, Sir Ashley	Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Moore, Robbie
	Morrissey, Joy
	Morton, rh Wendy

Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Philp, rh Chris
Pritchard, rh Mark
Rankin, Jack
Reed, David
Rosindell, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Spencer, Dr Ben

Spencer, Patrick
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Thomas, Bradley
Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike

Tellers for the Ayes:

**James Wild and
Mr Andrew Snowden**

NOES

Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Adam, Shockat
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Berry, Siân
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Bishop, Matt
Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast
by Chris Elmore*)
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris

Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Bryant, Chris
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carling, Sam
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Chowns, Ellie
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul

Davies-Jones, Alex
De Cordova, Marsha
Dean, Josh
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duffield, Rosie
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foxcroft, Vicky
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelder, Anna
German, Gill
Gilbert, Tracy
Gittins, Becky
Glendon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Gosling, Jodie
Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Hack, Amanda
Hamilton, Paulette
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Hume, Alison
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jarvis, Dan
Jermy, Terry

Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Jones, rh Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Louise
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast
by Chris Elmore*)
Kendall, rh Liz
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kumaran, Uma
Kyle, rh Peter
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, rh Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McDougall, Blair
McEvoy, Lola
McFadden, rh Pat
McGovern, Alison
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
McNally, Frank
McNeill, Kirsty
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Mohamed, Abtisam
Mohamed, Iqbal
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame

Morris, Joe
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, Emma
 Rhodes, Martin
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scroggum, Michelle
 Sowards, Mr Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat

Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred (*Proxy vote
 cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:
 Kate Dearden and
 Taiwo Owatemi

Question accordingly negated.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

A Division was called.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Division off.

Question agreed to.

CHILDREN'S WELLBEING AND SCHOOLS BILL (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 11 February.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(*Christian Wakeford.*)

Question agreed to.

CHILDREN'S WELLBEING AND SCHOOLS BILL (MONEY)

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(1) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State or by a government department, and

(2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under or by virtue of any other Act out of money so provided.—(*Christian Wakeford.*)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

BANKS AND BANKING

That the draft Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Ring-fenced Bodies, Core Activities, Excluded Activities and Prohibitions) (Amendment) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 11 November 2024, be approved.—(*Christian Wakeford.*)

Question agreed to.

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

FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS

That the draft Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Designated Activities) (Supervision and Enforcement) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 11 November 2024, be approved.—(*Christian Wakeford.*)

Question agreed to.

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

FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS

That the draft Short Selling Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 11 November 2024, be approved.—(*Christian Wakeford.*)

Question agreed to.

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

RETAINED EU LAW REFORM

That the draft Electricity Capacity Mechanism (Amendment) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 18 November 2024, be approved.—(*Christian Wakeford.*)

The Deputy Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 15 January (Standing Order No. 41A).

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

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE

That the draft Representation of the People (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 11 November 2024, be approved.—(*Christian Wakeford.*)

Question agreed to.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Earlier, in the Second Reading debate, when I said that child sexual abuse and exploitation is happening in every area of the country, perpetrated by members of every social class, race and religion, the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) shouted, "Denial!" There is no denial in my statement at all. It is the very opposite; it is a statement of fact. Research by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children suggests that around one in 20 children in the UK have been sexually abused. Jon Brown, the former NSPCC lead for tackling sexual abuse, said:

"Sexual abuse is happening in every community and affects all levels of society, destroying the childhoods of children from every background."

It is not me who is in denial; it is the hon. Member who, in disagreeing with this statement of fact, is denying the reality of child sexual abuse and exploitation in this country and is downplaying its extent. I do not want an apology, but I seek your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, on how we can ensure that important debates of such a sensitive nature are always led by fact. We owe it to victims and survivors.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Member for giving notice of her point of order. I am sure she will have notified the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) that she intended to raise the matter with us. As she will know, the Chair is not responsible for the content of contributions made either in debates or from a sedentary position, but she has put her view on the record, and she will know that that was not a point of order for the Chair.

PETITIONS

Ellen Badger Hospital in-patient beds

7.20 pm

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): I rise to present a petition signed by over 4,000 residents of Shipston-on-Stour and its surrounding villages—some of them are in the Gallery—fighting for the return of their in-patient beds at the Ellen Badger hospital. This petition reflects the depth of feeling of a rural community that has seen its health services stripped to the bone and is fearful for the future of its hospital. Rural communities deserve the same access to healthcare as our towns and cities. The Coventry and Warwickshire integrated care board must hear loud and clear that our rural communities must not be left behind.

The petition states:

"The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to support the retainment of the in-patient beds for the Ellen Badger Community Hospital in Shipston-on-Stour.

And the petitioners remain, etc."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Shipston-on-Stour,

Declares that the Ellen Badger Hospital in the town of Shipston-on-Stour has a strong tradition of care for generations of local residents, and there is huge public upset, and disappointment, at the recommendations to remove the in-patient ward; further that community hospitals with in-patient beds provide important integrated healthcare facilities, as well as employment opportunities to the local community; and further that the provision of a comprehensive healthcare facility with in-patient beds close to home is essential for our rural communities.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to support the retainment of the in-patient beds for the Ellen Badger Community Hospital in Shipston-on-Stour.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003029]

Grimsby Post Office

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes opposing the possible closure of Grimsby post office.

We are deeply disappointed to hear that the post office in Grimsby town centre is at risk of closure under the Post Office's strategic review. The branch provides numerous services, such as business banking, to residents in the town, particularly older residents, and it is the last Crown post office in north-east Lincolnshire. The petition asks that the Government strongly encourage and work with the Post Office to protect post office services in Grimsby town centre. The residents of Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes

"request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate action to ensure that the Grimsby Post Office remains open to continue to provide incredibly important services to residents in the town.

And the petitioners remain, etc."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes,

Declares that, similar to an online petition which acquired 568 signatures, the Post Office should rethink their plans to close the Grimsby Post Office and take it off the 'at risk' register.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate action to ensure that the Grimsby Post Office remains open to continue to provide incredibly important services to residents in the town.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003029]

Trial of Lucy Letby

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Before I call the Whip to move the motion for the Adjournment, I remind the House that although there are currently no live proceedings before the courts, there is still the potential for further civil or criminal proceedings. Members will therefore wish to take care to avoid saying anything that could prejudice any case that might come before the courts in future.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Christian Wakeford.*)

7.23 pm

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): I am not in the habit of issuing trigger warnings, but I must warn the House that this speech will cover deeply distressing events. I will discuss infant deaths, failures in care and allegations of a grave miscarriage of justice.

Lucy Letby was convicted of murdering seven infants and attempting to murder seven more. She received multiple concurrent full-life sentences. The case horrified the nation. It seemed clear: a nurse had turned into a serial killer. I initially accepted the tabloid characterisation of Letby as an evil monster, but then I was approached by many experts, including leading statisticians, neonatal specialists, forensic scientists, legal experts, and those who had served at the Chester hospital and are afraid to come forward. The experts included a past president of the Royal Statistical Society and a past president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health—people who were more knowledgeable than the purported experts whose evidence convicted Lucy Letby. They were all concerned by what they perceived as the false analyses and diagnoses used to persuade a lay jury to convict Letby.

Sadly, none of us is a stranger to miscarriages of justice; there have simply been too many. The Birmingham Six, the Guildford Four and the Stockwell Six are the famous ones, but the Exeter University miscarriage database lists nearly 500 people who have been wrongfully imprisoned. Astonishingly, wrong forensic evidence is responsible for 81 cases leading to over 500 years of unjust imprisonment. Many of those cases involve caregivers convicted by medical expert testimony asserting deliberate harm where causes of death were in fact natural. Those people were all exonerated, but those who doubted their guilt were initially met with the same fierce public pushback that now faces those who question Letby's guilt.

So what has happened here? The Countess of Chester hospital neonatal unit suffered a sharp increase in deaths, from a typical two to four a year to 17 in one 13-month period. When hospital senior management became aware of the elevated mortality in June 2016, they were alarmed and commissioned some investigations. The most notable was carried out in November 2016 by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, whose report noted many failings on the unit, all of which—at least in part, if not in total—could have been the cause of the deaths. The report highlighted inadequate staffing levels, delayed escalation of concerns to tertiary units and

“disconnection between the neonatal leadership and the trust's government and risk management processes.”

In essence, because of a mixture of inadequate resources and poor medical management, the hospital was not capable of keeping those very fragile babies alive. That fact was recognised by the hospital when the neonatal unit was downgraded in July 2016 and stopped taking babies

[David Davis]

of less than 32 weeks' gestation. The report, offering completely different reasons for the deaths, was never shown to the jury.

Some consultants had attempted to blame Letby for the deaths. A redacted section of the report states:

"The consultants explained that their allegation was based on Nurse L being on shift on each occasion an infant died (although not necessarily caring for the infant) combined with 'gut feeling'. There was no other evidence or history to link Nurse L to the deaths, and her colleagues had expressed no concerns about her practice."

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

David Davis: No, I am afraid I will not—I am short of time.

Again, that section of the report was never shown to the jury. Those consultants then persuaded management to call the police in April 2017. There was no hard evidence against Letby. Nobody saw her do anything untoward. The doctors' "gut feeling" was based on a coincidence: she was on shift for a number of the deaths, but—and this is important—far from all of them. The case was built on a poor understanding of probabilities that was to translate later into an influential but spectacularly flawed piece of evidence.

Around that time, the hospital was struggling with another problem—and possibly a more sensible explanation for this sudden increase in deaths. Leaked reports show that the hospital, and specifically the neonatal unit, battled a *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* infection for months. That antibiotic-resistant bug posed a serious risk to the babies. The child mortality rate for *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* ranges from 14.5% to 50%, and stands at over 55% for infants of extremely low birth weight, such as those in this case. It is hard to see how we can eliminate that as the cause of death or collapse for at least some of those babies. Again, the jury never knew about that contamination.

From the start of the case, Cheshire police picked up on the doctors' statistical arguments supposedly pointing to Letby. In April 2018, an officer on the investigation approached a leading statistician, Professor Jane Hutton, and asked her to put a figure on the likelihood of a nurse being on duty "during all the deaths/collapses" in the unit. Of course, that is a false proposition, as Letby was not on duty for anything like all the deaths—as we will see later—but that was glossed over at the trial. Notwithstanding that, Professor Hutton informed the police that any proper statistical inquiry should not concentrate on one staff member from the outset. Instead, it would require full, proper research into all possible explanations for any increase in babies collapsing, including their medical conditions and prematurity, as well as the broader performance of the unit. One would think that would be common sense.

Cheshire police then signed a consultancy agreement with Professor Hutton, but in 2021, after Letby had been charged, the police wrote an email to Professor Hutton, stating:

"We have had a further meeting this afternoon where we have informed the prosecutors that we were looking at the validity of statistical evidence again in the case... The prosecutor... has instructed us not to pursue this avenue any further at present."

This appears to be in direct contravention of part 3.3 of the code for Crown prosecutors, which states:

"Prosecutors cannot direct the police or other investigators."

Again, the jury was never informed of Professor Hutton's explicit advice to the police that their statistical approach was flawed. This matters enormously, because the most powerfully influential piece of evidence in the case was the prosecution King's counsel showing a table with Letby listed as the only nurse on duty for all of the alleged murders and inflicted injuries. Professor Hutton, who has reviewed the case extensively, believes that deeply flawed statistical evidence was used, and has said that the statistical errors are "similar to those...in the Sally Clark case but worse." Sally Clark was convicted and then acquitted of the murder of her two sons based on flawed statistical evidence.

In May 2017, Dewi Evans, a retired doctor who runs a business that provides highly paid medical "expert evidence" in court cases, approached the National Crime Agency to volunteer his services. Evans's opinion that Letby injected air either into the babies' veins, causing air embolism, or down the nasogastric tube into the stomach, stopping the babies' breathing, was one of the foundations—indeed, probably the major foundation—of the prosecution case. This supposed evidence is hugely controversial. Three months into the murder trial, Letby's defence team applied for evidence from Dewi Evans to be excluded due to an adverse judgment from a judge in a previous case, who said that a report by Dr Evans was "worthless" and

"makes no effort to provide a balanced opinion".

In an extraordinary and—as far as I can see—unprecedented intervention, that very judge, Lord Justice Jackson, actually wrote to the trial judge with his judgment on Dr Evans attached, clearly indicating how unsuitable Evans was as an expert witness.

Evans's assertion of murder by air embolism was entirely based on a research paper from 1989, and its relevance in these cases has been robustly challenged by the actual author of that paper. Evans changed his opinion on several key issues during the trial, and is now accused by Letby's lawyer of changing his opinion again since the end of the appeal process. Evans disputes this, but if Members are interested, I suggest that they compare his evidence recorded in the trial transcript of 1 November 2022 with his signed statement to Channel 5 on 3 August 2024 and decide for themselves. It is also the case that Evans has submitted a new report to the police. What is extraordinary, however, is that the Crown Prosecution Service has refused to provide a copy of that report to Letby's current defence counsel.

Questions have also been raised about the second expert witness for the prosecution, Dr Sandie Bohin. Eight families are currently filing formal complaints against her over their children's care, which are being considered by the General Medical Council.

That brings us to the actual cases and causes of the deaths. Two expert neonatologists—consultant working neonatologists—are working through the cases to establish the actual causes of the babies' deterioration and deaths. They are doing so thoroughly, so this is taking time. So far, they have completed two detailed case reviews for babies O and C. There are five more that will be completed in the near future.

In the case of Baby O, the prosecution claimed the baby was attacked with blunt trauma to the liver and had air injected into the nasogastric tube. The case notes tell a different story, showing how the doctors

used excessive ventilation pressure during resuscitation, which overinflated the baby's lungs and prevented blood from flowing back to the lungs. This caused the baby to desaturate his blood oxygen level repeatedly. The medical team responded by increasing the pressures even more, initiating a downward spiral in the baby's condition. The overinflation of the baby's lungs forced the diaphragm downwards, pushing the liver into the baby's abdominal cavity.

The consultant in charge took a decision to insert a needle into the abdomen to release what they thought was gas pressure in the abdomen. However, this was wrongly inserted into the right side of the baby's abdomen. As a result of this error, the needle penetrated the liver, causing serious internal bleeding. This was undoubtedly a significant contributory factor in the baby's death, if not the outright cause. The report states that the

"deterioration was predictable, and his death was avoidable and resulted from suboptimal care."

The author of that sub-optimal care, the doctor who inserted the needle into the liver, was one of the principal accusers of Lucy Letby at the trial. This directly contradicts the prosecution's portrayal of events. The trauma to the liver was caused by a serious error by one of the consultants who led the accusations against Letby. The experts also stated that there was no air in the gut in excess of what would be expected for a baby in these circumstances. None of this was made clear to the jury. The prosecution's evidence was again predicated on Dewi Evans's diagnosis, which in this specific case alone changed multiple times.

In the case of Baby C, the prosecution claimed this was a healthy baby killed by air being injected into his stomach. The case notes for Baby C demonstrate that this baby was actually profoundly unwell before birth. The baby suffered from severe foetal growth restriction. This meant the baby had to be delivered by caesarean section at an extraordinarily low birth weight, even for that gestation, of 800 grams or about 1.75 lb. Within an hour of birth, he developed respiratory distress. To treat the respiratory problems, they tried to deliver surfactant, a mixture that helps babies' lungs to expand better—open up—down an endotracheal tube.

The case notes, however, show that the doctor pushed the tube too far in, pushing it into one lung, meaning that the other lung was left collapsed. In the days after the baby's birth, he showed several signs of abdominal obstruction, including the vomiting of bile, and he never opened his bowels since birth, which the doctor in charge did not recognise or diagnose. The report concludes by stating that this baby died of natural causes compounded by sub-optimal medical care. This again directly contradicts the prosecution's narrative of deliberate harm. Dewi Evans's diagnosis claimed the baby had air injected into the stomach, so he could no longer breathe. This was predicated on an X-ray showing an unusual amount of air on the stomach. It has become clear that Letby was not even at the hospital when the X-ray was taken, nor had she been at any point till then since Baby C's birth two days earlier. While the baby died from natural causes, there is evidence of sub-optimal care, including

"the administration of surfactant and the lack of recognition and appropriate management of signs of abdominal obstruction".

Again, the doctor responsible for these errors was another one of those who made accusations against Lucy Letby and, again, none of this was made clear to the jury.

There is a great deal of evidence demonstrating that there are much more likely alternative causes of these tragic deaths than those put up by the prosecuting team. The most likely is that the hospital's neonatal unit was not up to caring for these fragile children, in terms of either resource or skill, and this shortcoming might have been compounded by other factors such as the *Pseudomonas* infection.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that there is a family connection with my constituency of Hereford and South Herefordshire. What he says is deeply troubling and distressing on so many different levels, and I would like to ask whether his conclusion is that there is some case in justice to consider this an unsafe verdict.

David Davis: There is a case in justice for a retrial in my view, but there is a problem—I would say it is a technical problem. One of the problems we face is that much of the evidence was available at the time. What I have described is an expert analysis of the case notes that were there at the time, but it was simply not presented to the jury. That means that the Court of Appeal can dismiss it, basically saying that the defence should have presented it at the initial trial. It is in essence saying, "If your defence team weren't good enough to present this evidence, hard luck, you stay banged up for life." That may be judicially convenient, but it is not justice. This has been a historic problem in Britain, delaying the resolution of a number of miscarriage of justice cases.

Secondly, the so-called expert evidence in this case largely amounted to putting together theories suiting the prosecution case, from the bogus statistical arguments through to the wrong diagnoses I have just detailed. Again, this problem is not new. In 2011 the Law Commission made a number of recommendations precisely on the handling of expert evidence. There is even a section in it entitled, "Inferring murder from unexplained infant deaths." Those recommendations have not made it into law nearly 15 years later, and it is past time that was put right. Perhaps most worrying of all in this case is that it is just the latest example, more than a decade after the Mid Staffs scandal, of the national health service's inability to analyse its own failings. This matters because until we learn these lessons, there will continue to be unnecessary deaths in hospitals up and down the country.

My central argument today, which comes back to what my right hon. Friend asked me, is about what to do about a trial which, in my view, is a clear miscarriage of justice by a judicial system that could not manage admittedly difficult statistical and medical scientific evidence. The only body available to correct this today is the Criminal Cases Review Commission. In my view, it should look at all the new diagnoses when they come out, and if necessary consult the leading neonatal and statistical authorities in the land—the most expert people, who are much more equipped to give proper assessment than the experts who were employed by the police at the time. As a result, in my view it should order a retrial, and it should do it quickly.

This is significant because the CCRC has recently been criticised—Members may have read about it in the Andrew Malkinson case, where there was effectively a

[David Davis]

17-year delay in releasing him from prison. DNA evidence proving him innocent of the rape he was convicted of was known four years after his conviction, yet it took a further 13 years to correct it. That cannot happen again. We cannot repeat that. If, as I believe it will, a retrial clears Lucy Letby, she should be released in her thirties, not in her fifties.

7.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): I thank the right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis) for securing this debate. First, I want to acknowledge the impact on the families that any debate surrounding this case may have. As Lady Justice Thirlwall stated at the outset of her inquiry, much of this debate has come from people who were not present throughout the trial to hear the evidence in full. The parents have been waiting a long time for answers, and it is important, whatever may be said here this evening, that we agree that we must work towards delivering closure for those families, who are going through unimaginable and intolerable grief.

It is an important principle of the rule of law that the Government do not interfere with judicial decisions. In this case, the Court of Appeal has carefully considered the arguments before it and delivered its judgment. Given that, and the ongoing police investigations, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on Miss Letby's case specifically, but I will outline the principles and procedures regarding expert witnesses and appeals.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister give way?

Alex Davies-Jones: I will not, as unfortunately we are tight on time. My apologies.

First, in the area of expert evidence, the criminal procedure rules apply the common law principles that govern the admissibility of expert witness and provide a structured framework for expert witnesses and the courts to follow. They cover expert witnesses and how medical reports are commissioned, and the "Criminal Practice Directions 2023" provide detailed guidance on expert evidence. All of those are followed for every criminal proceeding where it is relevant. Like all criminal procedure rules, they are regularly reviewed by the Criminal Procedure Rule Committee. The committee is made up of legal experts appointed by the Lord Chancellor in consultation with the Lady Chief Justice, and its role is to make the criminal justice system as accessible, fair and efficient as possible.

The rules outline that expert evidence is admissible only if

"the witness is competent to give that opinion"

and

"the expert opinion is sufficiently reliable to be admitted."

They further state that the expert witness must provide the court with the necessary scientific criteria against which to judge their conclusions and must give notice of anything that might undermine the reliability of the evidence or detract from the impartiality or credibility of their evidence. Expert witnesses are required to sign a declaration of truth to that effect.

The right to a fair trial by jury in the most serious cases is a fundamental principle of the justice system. It is designed to protect the rights of the defendant and to ensure thorough examination of the evidence. That includes the presentation of evidence by both the prosecution and the defence; the examination and cross-examination of witnesses; and the impartial judgment of the jury. Where scientific evidence is presented, the judiciary utilises judicial primers written by leading scientists, peer reviewed by scientists and legal practitioners, and approved by the councils of the Royal Society and the Royal Society of Edinburgh. While I note the concerns raised about the trial process as set out, the jury considered all the evidence put before them and made their determination.

Secondly, I turn to the appeals process in the criminal justice system. Following Miss Letby's first permission to appeal application, the Court of Appeal heard legal argument over several days on a number of grounds and issued a detailed 58-page judgment setting out why permission to appeal was refused. That included the trial judge's handling of the arguments raised by the defence as to Dr Evans's evidence.

It is not appropriate for me or the Government to comment on judicial processes, nor on the reliability of convictions or evidence. Furthermore, the criminal justice system provides a route through the Criminal Cases Review Commission for those who believe that they have been wrongfully convicted and the appeal system has been exhausted. The CCRC is an independent body, and it reviews any applications made to it according to its statutory role and procedures. Its role is to investigate cases where people believe they have been wrongly convicted and to refer cases back to the Court of Appeal where it believes that there is a real possibility of a conviction not being upheld.

Miss Letby, as with any other convicted person who maintains their innocence following a refusal to appeal, is able to apply to the CCRC. The decision on whether to seek a review from the CCRC is a matter for Miss Letby and her legal team.

Thirdly, it is relevant to take into account that the Thirlwall inquiry was established in October 2023, chaired by Lady Justice Thirlwall—one of the country's most senior judges—and that that is ongoing. The inquiry is purposefully set up to be independent from Government, and it will play an important role in identifying learnings following events at the Countess of Chester hospital, contributing to the future of patient safety. It will cover the experiences of the parents of the babies named in the indictment, the conduct of staff management and governance processes, and the effectiveness of governance, external scrutiny, and the professional regulation of keeping babies in hospital safe, including consideration of the NHS culture. The inquiry will examine not the conviction, but rather the response of individuals within the trust based on what they knew or should have known at the time of the events when they occurred. Lady Justice Thirlwall made that clear in her remarks when opening the hearings. A statutory inquiry cannot apportion civil or criminal liability and will not review the jury's findings.

It is, of course, open to the experts to contact the inquiry directly and seek to participate through the provision of evidence for the inquiry's consideration. It is then for the chair to manage the inquiry as she

considers appropriate to deliver the public terms of reference, which were agreed in consultation with the families and other stakeholders. The chair will consider all relevant available evidence when drawing conclusions and when writing her report and recommendations in due course. Given the importance of the inquiry, I am sure it is appreciated that it must have space to gather evidence from the various stakeholders and to draw its own findings without ministerial involvement.

The criminal justice system has well-established processes and procedures for how expert evidence is used, and routes to challenge if any individual, including Miss Letby, maintains their innocence.

Jim Shannon: Setting aside what the right hon. Gentleman has put forward, I have been made aware that some NHS staff question their culpability and their ability to do their job—that is how they feel. Some NHS staff have left the profession simply because of their concerns. I ask the Minister gently, what can be done to restore the confidence of NHS staff, particularly the nurses?

Alex Davies-Jones: The hon. Member makes an important intervention. It is important that all individuals in public life feel that they can speak openly and with a duty of candour. That is why the Lady Thirlwall's inquiry will look at the culture in the NHS. More broadly, this Government are committed to bringing forward a Hillsborough law, which will look at a duty of candour to ensure that individuals in public life tell the truth.

It is not safe for me or the Government to undermine any of the processes in the justice system. Our attention should rightly remain on the families and parents impacted by this case and on continuing to work towards providing answers and closure for them. It is to the families that I speak to. The Thirlwall inquiry will play a key role in this.

Question put and agreed to.

7.51 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 8 January 2025

[ESTHER McVEY *in the Chair*]

Social Housing Tenants: Antisocial Behaviour

9.30 am

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): I beg to move,

That this House has considered social housing tenants and antisocial behaviour.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. Let us imagine a Government who believe that a council house should be a privilege, not a right, and that people have to be of good standing and in full-time employment to secure the keys. Let us imagine a Government who support the idea that a council house should be given on suitability rather than a need for social housing. Let us then imagine that same Government supporting the idea that people should keep their council house in good order: keep it decorated, keep it well maintained, do the garden, empty the bins, and make sure that their families do not cause trouble on the street. There was such a Government who believed in all that: the 1940s Clement Attlee Government.

Clement Attlee built over 1 million homes in our great country, and all the things I have just mentioned were beliefs of the Labour Government at the time. But if we fast forward 80 years I think Captain Clem would be turning in his grave after looking at some of the council estates up and down the country, such as Carsic estate, Leamington estate, Coxmoor estate in Ashfield, and estates over in Mansfield such as Bull Farm and Ladybrook, where we have families creating mayhem and misery. People call them “feral families” in my neck of the woods. There are people who cause problems on every single council estate throughout Mansfield and Ashfield, and it is a big problem. In this place we have the power to sort that out. I did try under the last Government, but it fell on deaf ears.

Before I came to this place, one of the main complaints that I got—I am sure many hon Members will agree—was about antisocial behaviour on council estates, which destroys and ruins lives. Most of us MPs, I imagine, live in nice houses; we have security, CCTV and panic alarms. Some of us live in nice big posh pads in gated communities—it is all right for us. We do not have to go home each night and put up with horrible, nuisance, criminal behaviour.

Let us imagine coming home after a hard day’s work at the factory, as many people in Ashfield do, and all we can hear is swearing, verbal threats, intimidation, shouting, screaming, outrageous noises—sounds a bit like a Labour Cabinet meeting. Joking aside, that is happening in every constituency throughout our great country. Let us imagine that we put up with that behaviour when we get home from a hard day’s graft. We go to bed and the noise continues. We can hear music playing and the idiots from across the road revving their motorbikes up and down the street. We open the bedroom window in the summer and the stench of weed comes wafting in. Then we manage to get a few hours’ sleep.

At 6 o’clock the alarm clock goes off and those idiots are just about going to bed, because they have been up all night creating mayhem, causing crime, and being complete nuisances. Yet when we get up in the morning to go to work—to do a shift; to do our seven days to pay our taxes—we are paying for those jobs, those idiots, to live in their social housing. We pay for their rent and benefits, and we wonder why: “Why are we doing this? Why can’t these people live by our rules? Why can’t they integrate? Why can’t they live our way of life?”

Many years ago—I am going back about 30 years—Ashfield district council had a brainwave. We had one particular street on the Carsic council estate that was notorious for antisocial behaviour, crime and poor behaviour. The council put all the nuisance tenants on one street. I am not saying that was a solution, but that is what it did. So when anything kicked off with any crime, the police went straight to one street and nine times out of 10 they knew where the culprits were.

Then the Labour council had a brainwave: it decided to take every single nuisance family off the street, spread them around the estate and put them on different streets. It thought that was a good idea. It thought that the good behaviour of the surrounding streets would encourage those nuisance tenants to be good tenants, to be good neighbours, to integrate and to respect their neighbours, but the opposite happened.

Just a few months after, we realised that every single street on that estate was having problems with antisocial behaviour, so the council had taken the problem from one street and spread it out to every single street on the estate. It was a complete failure, and our police and councillors could do very little about it because they are not backed up by the courts. When we get a nuisance tenant in Ashfield, for example, the courts sometimes carry out a lengthy investigation. They tell the complainants, “Keep a diary,” and give them diary sheets for about two years until they are fed up to the back teeth of filling them out, and eventually they just stop complaining.

In 2022, a Government survey showed that 26%—nearly one in three—of social housing tenants suffer from antisocial behaviour. That is a disgrace in this country. A 2018 report by Nottingham Trent University said that social housing tenants are 30% more likely to see antisocial behaviour, crime, drug dealing and so on.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate on an issue that is exceptionally important in working-class areas. Does he agree that those who suffer most from the problem are those who live cheek by jowl with the very tenants he is talking about? It is working-class tenants in social housing, aspiring to a better life for them and their children, who suffer the most and are crying out for help and assistance to solve the problem.

Lee Anderson: I could not put it any better myself. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: it is the aspiring, decent, hard-working, working-class families who need a bit of a leg up. They get social housing—a council house—and they want to do the right thing; maybe at one stage they will actually buy the house. They put a shift in: mum and dad go to work, the kids behave themselves, but next door or across the road they have a

[Lee Anderson]

nuisance family who are completely ruining their lives. That affects their mental health and it is absolutely shocking.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): I rise to make a point about Wales. I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate, which has particular relevance to my constituency of Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe. Rural crime is defined as crime and antisocial behaviour occurring in rural areas, where we have plenty of social housing. In my region, just 0.24% of staff in the local police force are dedicated to rural crime units, despite the significant impact that that crime has on places such as Brecon and Ystradgynlais. Does he agree that antisocial behaviour is a significant issue across mid and south Wales too, and that police resourcing should reflect that challenge?

Lee Anderson: Well, yes, I agree with what the hon. Gentleman says, but I am not sure we can blame all that crime on council tenants or social housing tenants. I take his point.

I am surprised that I have not yet had an intervention from the Government Benches, because I usually get asked, "Where are these nuisance neighbours going to live? Where do we put them?" Well, on the record, hon. Members, I am not bothered where they go, but I have two options for those people. They can either behave themselves and become good tenants, good neighbours, and integrate, or they can do what other people—normal people—do: go and get a job, stop committing crime, work hard, save some money up for a deposit or save enough for a bond, and go and rent privately somewhere.

The important thing is that we need a deterrent. When I was a local councillor in Ashfield, we had youths in the local park who were creating mayhem, making fires and attacking people—all sorts of horrible, feral behaviour. The local council and the police had a real problem trying to sort the issue out, but after a bit of an investigation we found that the parents of a lot of the youths who were causing problems lived in social housing on the nearby estate, so we wrote to every single one and said, "If your child carries this on, you are breaching your tenancy agreement and we might have to look at booting you out." The poor behaviour stopped straightaway—overnight.

That is one option that I hope Ministers can look at for social housing tenants with poor behaviour. I believe in the "three strikes and you're out" rule, where people are given one warning, then another, and on the third warning they are gone. Quite frankly, I am not that interested in where those people go to live. My focus and concern are the decent, hard-working people who put a shift in, have not got much money and rely on social housing.

I agree with the 1940s Clement Attlee Government that the allocation of a council house should be based on suitability rather than need. To do that, we need to repeal some laws passed here 40 odd years ago—housing and homelessness legislation—and look at the people who are in priority need. Based on suitability, those who should have priority need are people who will respect the house, be good citizens, go to work and not be a nuisance in their neighbourhood.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that, should they wish to speak and be called in the debate, they need to bob. Members wishing to speak need to be here for the opening and closing statements. Wind-ups will begin at 10.30 am, with two minutes at the end for the mover of the motion.

9.41 am

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) for securing this important debate. The Labour Government have a clear mission to tackle antisocial behaviour and halve violence against women and girls.

My constituency is troubled by endemic antisocial behaviour, both domestically and in our town centre. In addition, Mansfield is the worst affected town in Nottinghamshire for violent offences perpetrated by men against women. Hon. Members will know my concern for women's welfare in both of those regards, having alluded to them in previous debates. My experience from listening to victims of antisocial behaviour in this context is that they are often women who are systematically failed by a response system unfit for purpose. That disadvantages women victims in their journey for justice when facing this abuse.

That is not a criticism of the police or necessarily of community safety and housing teams and officers in local authorities. Broadly speaking, my experience is that they are doing their utmost to deal with the situation, within the legal framework that they face and the resources that they have. Before I continue, I would like to pass on my gratitude to Nottinghamshire police, especially Inspector Davies and her neighbourhood team in Mansfield, as well as Mansfield district council, for engaging with my office about casework on issues outlined by the hon. Member for Ashfield. I can already see the impact of the new neighbourhood policing approach and strategy in Mansfield.

Lee Anderson: The hon. Member makes some great points. Does he agree that if we can get it right and stop this horrible nuisance behaviour in social housing, there would be hardly any need for the police to come, thus saving police resources?

Steve Yemm: Indeed, and I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I agree, and I will address that in my comments.

We need named neighbourhood officers taking ownership of their patches in council estates and social housing areas in our town and becoming part of the community again. We are already beginning to see in multi-agency meetings the impact that that can have.

In the press over the weekend and again today, the hon. Member has talked about his desire to implement a three-strike rule for social housing tenants that would see them evicted after three instances of antisocial behaviour that meets the evidence threshold to demonstrate it. I would argue that this proposition is somewhat too liberal and lenient and does not go far enough to address the issues.

Lee Anderson: I am astounded that the hon. Member disagrees on this point. Will he now agree to a one-strike-and-out rule?

Steve Yemm: That is exactly what I am saying. I wish to address the issues that are being endured by social housing tenants at the hands of those who are consistently perpetrating domestic antisocial behaviour in their neighbourhoods, and a “three strikes and you’re out” approach would take many, many years of them suffering this type of abuse. I will outline why I think such an approach would be lacking in its effectiveness of outcome and deterrence.

First, my experience is that there are issues with the evidence threshold. Councils in my area and many others are asking victims of antisocial behaviour in social housing to bear the burden of proof by taking their own recordings and notes and submitting them. Many constituents who attend my surgeries have gone through all the stress and anxiety of doing that on numerous occasions, having put their mental wellbeing and often their personal security at risk, only to then be told that the evidence does not meet the threshold required to instigate an intervention.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I agree very much with the hon. Member’s points, and I wonder if he is a member of the right party on that basis. Is he not dismayed that the Secretary of State has ditched our plans to remove social housing for people who are consistently guilty of antisocial behaviour?

Steve Yemm: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. My dismay is at what I hear from my constituents, many of whom have suffered for many years trying to prove a single instance of antisocial behaviour. Indeed, they are often then notified that the advised method of evidence collection—often recordings on a mobile phone app—does not satisfy the evidential requirements to take action. After many years of threats to their own security and a great deal of effort, they find that the action is dropped and has to be started again. This is not an isolated incident in my constituency. Many, many women—and it is almost always women—have come to me in tears at my surgeries.

Lee Anderson: The hon. Member is being very generous with his time. He has mentioned women quite a lot in his speech, but let us talk about pensioners. We have this nonsense in Ashfield where there are flats and bungalows that were designed for pensioners and over-65s, but sadly, as some of them die off, the local council, with another brainwave, has started putting nuisances in these flats: druggies, ex-cons—people who live a life of criminality. When they put one of these people in a flat, all their friends and family come to visit, and it is creating problems in flats that were designed just for the over-65s. Does the hon. Member think we should have a policy to stop this straightaway and let these old people live in peace?

Steve Yemm: Again, I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. The experience that I have from casework tells me many of those things also; I see many examples of such casework at my surgery. I think councils should and must be better equipped for enforcement action than they are today. They need to make a dedicated response. It needs to be backed by stronger regulation. They need to work more closely alongside the police to gather evidence of reports of antisocial behaviour. I would hope that, in turn, that would free up our police

officers to respond to more serious criminal activity, rather than having to focus their resources on these recurring incidents.

Secondly, in my outlook, affording up to three strikes under the current system may well perpetuate the crisis, leaving some of those upstanding and decent social housing tenants at the mercy of problem tenants in neighbourhoods in my constituency. I fear that tenants in neighbouring properties would be subject to a process that could take years to conclude or that failed to do so because of loopholes and inconsistencies in their self-collected evidence.

We have a new Labour Government. We are looking to renew the social contract between the state and individuals, but part of that contract requires certain commitments of responsibility to earn the rights that it provides. Like all other citizens, social housing tenants should be expected to respect their neighbours and not contribute to antisocial behaviour, or they should forfeit the right to be housed by their council. In my outlook, rather than affording three strikes, this should be a zero-tolerance policy, and I am confident that my constituents who suffer at the hands of those engaged in antisocial behaviour in their neighbourhoods would agree with me.

Finally, I want to outline the mechanism that I have collaborated in with Mansfield police and Mansfield district council to tackle this issue. It has in part been made possible by the Government’s neighbourhood policing strategy and the direction of Nottinghamshire police, under the Labour police and crime commissioner, Gary Godden. Often, antisocial behaviour is complex in nature and a multifaceted, multi-agency approach is required to resolve it—something that, in my limited experience, should prevent passing of the buck. However, that collaboration can only be as effective as the legislative support that it has to operate under. We have seen the effect that Government policy is already having on neighbourhood policing, and stronger powers for councils would enable them to provide peace and security for respecting and respectable social housing tenants who abide by their tenancy contracts and reflect our British values of decency towards their neighbours.

9.52 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to speak in this debate and, as always, a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. Thank you so much for that opportunity.

I thank the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) for leading the debate and setting the scene. There is not one of us in this Chamber today who has not been impacted by this issue through our constituents. I want to give a couple of examples, and one of them will be incredibly extreme, but it does illustrate the issue. I know that this Minister has no responsibility for housing in Northern Ireland, but I know also that he has a deep interest in Northern Ireland. He has come over to Northern Ireland on a number of occasions, and we are always very pleased to see him there, because we know that he does that out of interest and wanting to help.

Issues involving antisocial behaviour impact all our constituencies, and we are no strangers to dealing with these issues in our offices. Unfortunately, probably nearly every week, I have at least one or two of these things to deal with. By the way, they are not always in social

[Jim Shannon]

housing. Sometimes they are in private housing as well, so people should not ever think that it is just social housing where the problems are. There is more to be done to protect tenants and also give housing associations more rights to take control of their own properties, so it is great to be here to discuss that.

May I first commend the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell)? He made a very pertinent comment. Many of those in social housing aspire to own their own house, whether the one they are living in, under the system of purchase, or a house elsewhere. To give one story as an example, many years ago someone came to me and said, "Jim, I've been offered a house up in a certain place, and I'm not sure whether I should take it, because it's got a reputation." I said, "My suggestion to you is: it's a lovely house, it's a lovely area, and I think you should take it. The reason I say that is that you could go there and have the best neighbour you ever had in your life, or you could go to somewhere really special and you could have the neighbour from hell. That's how it works. You have no control over who your neighbour is." The area does not always mean that the house itself is in a bad area. That person took that house, by the way, and they still live there. That is an example of taking an opportunity, and of having neighbours who are genuine and lovely.

I have a great working relationship with the Housing Executive in my constituency, and with Ards and North Down council and Newry, Mourne and Down council, because they take in a large portion of my constituency after the boundary changes. I believe it is important to have a good working relationship with the housing associations: first, with the Housing Executive, which is the biggest house owner in Northern Ireland, but also with Choice Housing, Radius Housing, Clanmil Housing, Alpha Housing and Habinteg. I name them all because they are important housing associations and providers in my constituency. Working together, we can ensure that tenants are safe and that their issues are dealt with quickly and efficiently.

I do not agree with the "three strikes and you're out" rule mentioned earlier. If someone is continuing to party, causing noise, disturbance and damage, and if someone has addiction issues, all those around them are impacted, especially in flats. If, for example, there is a six-block flat and one flat is partying all the time, the other five are all impacted by that, and maybe the neighbours next door as well, so we cannot ignore what is happening. When a tenant signs for a house, there is a list of conditions and rules to which they are supposed to adhere. If they cannot adhere to those rules, then they are out—the hon. Member for Mansfield (Steve Yemm) referred to that, and I think that is right. It is only right for those who want a decent life, who aspire to other things, who aspire to a quality of life, and who—even if they do not aspire to own a house—aspire to live peacefully with their neighbours. Those are the priorities we should be trying to achieve. The hon. Member for Ashfield has done us justice by securing this debate on an issue with which many of us have contact every day and every week.

Antisocial behaviour encompasses numerous disruptive activities, such as excessive noise, vandalism, harassment and other actions that cause harm or distress to individuals

or the community. Another such activity, which is prevalent specifically in my constituency, seems to be drinking and taking drugs. I am sorry to say that. I know that people have addictions—I am not here to criticise anybody—but I gently say that those with addictions, whether to alcohol, drugs or whatever, have a responsibility to look after, and not cause a problem to, their neighbours.

Both the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the housing associations offer clear guidelines on what constitutes antisocial behaviour and provide mechanisms for residents to report incidents.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and commend the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) for securing this excellent debate. Does my hon. Friend agree that many good, hard-working families, predominantly in our working-class estates, are being absolutely tortured because of the inappropriate placing of people within their estates? Often, we see people with addictions placed beside elderly residents and folks. There needs to be appropriate placing by our housing authorities and, when a problem is identified, action needs to be taken against them. It cannot take three, four or five years just to get these people into court.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend and colleague for that intervention. I am mindful that I am not allowed to name certain things in *Hansard*, so I will give the example without naming the estates. We had an occasion that was the very thing that she refers to, where individuals with problems seemed to be moved. Why were they moved out of estates in Belfast, Newtownabbey and further afield to come to Newtownards? I will tell you why: because they caused bother in those estates and they had to be moved elsewhere. An estate in my town, Newtownards, was their destination, and they brought their problems with them.

We had to have meetings with the police, the Housing Executive and an intermediary body that tries to find solutions, as well as with the Tenants Association and the local representatives. It is a massive problem. The hon. Member for Ashfield referred to an example where the people who cause problems were all put together on one street. There is a responsibility on the tenants—they must adhere to the rules. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive emphasises earlier intervention and prevention strategies to address antisocial behaviours effectively.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland—it is important to have police working alongside—is instrumental in providing support for keeping the peace, because there are many cases where it comes to blows and fighting, which spills out on to the street, and sometimes worse things happen. The police's first objective is to keep the peace and ensure that there is as little disruption as possible.

To give a perspective of the issue in Northern Ireland, in the 12-month period from March 2023 to February 2024, which is not that far back, there were 45,355 antisocial behaviour instances recorded by the PSNI, and the population in Northern Ireland is 1.9 million. My goodness! Those statistics give us an idea of the scale of the issue—in theory, they represent a decrease, and it is still an enormous figure.

Many may be aware—again, this is an extreme example—that one of the housing associations built a housing estate in Newtownards, and at the very beginning we expressed some concern that estates could potentially become aligned with one paramilitary group. I met the housing association at the very beginning to express that concern and ensure that that would not happen, and the housing association told me that it was constrained by the points system for allocating properties.

That estate was Weavers Grange in Newtownards—I will put this one on the record, because it became a fairly provincial story on a weekly basis over a period of time—where one organisation tried to ensure that the only people who could live in that estate were those who belonged to a certain group, and everyone else who wanted to go there found it impossible to stay there. Several homes were targeted, with windows smashed and graffiti sprayed—this was considered to be part of local, ongoing disputes. It has taken almost the last three years to erase that as a possibility.

By the way, the houses are lovely and really gorgeous—anyone would love to have one to live in, because they are modern and sought after—but if we cannot get peace in those estates, then we have a really serious problem to address. The housing association came round at the end of the day and understood the issues, and helped, along with the local community groups, which are critical to finding solutions and making places acceptable—the hon. Member for Mansfield referred to that as well.

Some of the instances of intimidation were actually death threats, so it was pretty heavy stuff. Efforts have been made by local neighbourhood policing teams, which include the community policing officers, the community groups, the housing associations and elected representatives, including myself, Members of the Legislative Assembly, councillors and community councillors. This is a clear example of the impact that antisocial behaviour can have on social housing developments, and in particular the impact it can have on other the tenants in the area.

When it comes to evicting a tenant, they have to go to court, and it takes such a long time, so my question is whether there is anything legislative that the Minister—who is always very helpful in his responses—could do to make the system quicker and take the niggles or aggravation out of the whole thing at an earlier stage?

I will commit to working alongside partners in my constituency to help to combat instances of antisocial behaviour. In the past, I have met members from the local policing teams to discuss strategies for combating ASB in local areas such as Newtownards, Killyleagh and Portavogie. I am sorry, Ms McVey, I am going on a wee bit; I am on the last paragraph now.

To conclude, there is more work to be done to tackle instances of antisocial behaviour in social housing areas, and the key word is collaboration. It is important that we have the collaboration among all the bodies, in conjunction with local police, housing associations, Members and other community politicians. There are so many other avenues that we can utilise to put an end to instances of ASB; and it is essential that we do this to make our towns and communities safer, happier and better places to live and work.

As I always do, I look to the Minister positively for his response, and for his commitment to ensure that more is done across the whole of the United Kingdom.

I know that he will be in touch with the representatives and bodies back home as well; perhaps he can give us some assurance on that.

10.5 am

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey.

Antisocial behaviour affects the very fabric of our neighbourhoods. The problem not only impacts the lives and wellbeing of those directly involved but reverberates throughout our communities, creating an environment of fear, discomfort and division. Ultimately, it serves to undermine the sense of community and safety that we all strive to preserve.

The motion refers to social housing tenants and antisocial behaviour, which is clearly what the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) wishes to focus on, but it is important to give context. ASB occurs in all types of housing and in many other settings. As a councillor, some of the most serious ASB that I dealt with related to neighbour disputes in owner-occupied and private rented housing, along with problems in our town centre, none of which were caused by social housing tenants. Not a day goes by when my casework mailbox does not highlight another example of a family in desperate need of more appropriate affordable housing—which we need to get on and build. Well designed, well managed social housing has an important role to play in that.

That said, social housing providers are in a unique position, in that they are well placed to tackle ASB when it occurs and they can influence factors such as estate design and tenant support to try to prevent it from occurring in the first place. In my local area—which you will be aware of, Ms McVey—I have witnessed at first hand the problems posed by poorly designed and badly planned section 106 affordable housing. There are schemes where properties have been designed without proper outdoor spaces, or where properties have been clustered together for the convenience of the house builder, rather than prioritising good estate management.

With the explosion in homelessness that has occurred over the last 14 years, combined with the systematic dismantling of local government, support services for dealing with addiction issues have been overstretched. In some cases, the clustering of vulnerable individuals without effective support has led to significant antisocial behaviour that directly affects the neighbouring homeowners and the broader community. On top of that, it also diminishes the potential for recovery and stability for the people themselves. This is not a sustainable situation.

To effectively tackle these problems we must advocate for a holistic approach to support. It is crucial that social housing providers and councils work together to provide tenants who are grappling with addiction not only the necessary resources to address their challenges but comprehensive wraparound support systems to help them to maintain their tenancies and transform their lives. We cannot simply place individuals in homes without equipping them with the tools they need to thrive. The funding for homelessness prevention that the Government announced just before Christmas is the first step to tackling the problem.

Changes to the planning system are also needed to deal with this issue. Section 106 affordable homes are vital in tackling the housing crisis, but it is just not good

[Andrew Cooper]

enough to include social housing providers in the design only at the last minute. It is vital that affordable homes are thoughtfully integrated throughout new housing developments, rather than clustered together in one corner.

Lee Anderson: This is more like it. The hon. Gentleman talks about integrating social housing into new housing estates; this is a big problem for me in Ashfield. We have had all these new housing estates and they give about 10% for social housing. Most of the time the tenants who move into social houses on private estates are good tenants, but then we get one, two or maybe three nuisance families who create mayhem for the rest of the people.

Bear in mind that people have bought their houses—they are mortgaged. They work seven days a week to pay for their house and next door, in exactly the same built house, is a family who do not go to work. They are smoking weed, causing problems and making peoples' lives a misery. I have had several cases where people who have actually bought their house have had to move out because the social housing provider has not acted on antisocial behaviour. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that when we build social houses on new housing estates, all the lets should be sensitive lets and it should be based on suitability rather than need?

Andrew Cooper: Where I would agree is that a house builder might well release a lot of section 106 properties at the same time, the effect of which could be that, when people are at the top of the waiting list, perhaps at band A, a lot of them are placed simultaneously. When we do that without having the support mechanism in place, without dealing with the addiction issues in the first place and without looking at the issues that might be caused, we can have problems. It is not as simple as the hon. Gentleman perhaps makes out—

Lee Anderson: It is.

Andrew Cooper: Well, I disagree. It is important to look at this holistically and consider the wider support system we need to put in place when we place people in social housing in the first place.

Finally, we cannot overlook the importance of visible neighbourhood policing, which was disregarded and diminished under the previous Government. A strong police presence in our communities can serve as both a deterrent to antisocial behaviour and a reassurance to residents. It fosters trust and collaboration between law enforcement and the community, creating a safer environment for everyone. That is why I welcome the Government's commitment to provide 13,000 additional neighbourhood police officers and police community support officers. I hope the Minister can provide an update on the provision of those officers throughout the country, and particularly in Cheshire constabulary in my local police force area.

We must advocate for stronger strategic partnerships between local authorities, housing providers and law enforcement agencies to ensure that our communities are resilient to the threat of antisocial behaviour. Again, I hope the Minister can outline the importance of a multi-agency approach to tackling these problems, and tell us what steps are being taken to promote such

collaborative working. It is clear that addressing antisocial behaviour requires a multifaceted approach. I believe that by providing holistic support to vulnerable tenants, advocating for better planning policies and enhancing neighbourhood policing, we can create safer, more harmonious communities for all.

10.11 am

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I congratulate my excellent hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) for securing this debate. He has been most generous with some of his suggestions—almost unusually so, which I shall come to shortly.

It seems to me that we must have the courage to look internationally at what works elsewhere. We look to New York city in the early 1990s, which had a simple slogan: broken windows. It starts right at the ground level. What was a lawless city was transformed by saying, "We want no broken windows, no graffiti and no antisocial behaviour". It worked. They flooded the streets with a visible security presence.

We know that having a proper deterrent also works. My hon. Friend was more than generous—unusually so—with his traffic light system of three strikes and out. I prefer a premier league football-style scenario: they get a yellow card and then they get a red card. The consequence would be that people would know that they, as a family, would lose their home if their youngsters misbehaved by, for example, revving their cars, smoking drugs or playing music from morning to dusk and throughout the night. These are the experiences that I hear about from my constituents in Boston and Skegness and in between. It is so unfair because, regardless of whether a person is a pensioner or they are going out to work to pay their taxes, mortgages or rent, it is unacceptable that those who live next door or nearby, who are not going to work, are causing absolute mayhem.

We have to have the courage to say that with rights come responsibilities. With the right to have a social housing home or a council home comes the responsibility both to look after it on the inside and to be part of the community on the street, in the housing estate and beyond. In the same way, the right for sick people, or people who are looking for work, to receive a benefit comes with the responsibility to contribute to society by looking for work. We must instil that within our culture. A deterrent is really important, so if someone does not behave, it should be two strikes and they are out and they should lose their home, in the same way that if someone does not look for work or misbehaves, they lose their benefits. If people understand that, maybe all of a sudden things will change.

We do not need more legislation—the legislation already exists. For example, public space protection orders can be used much more widely than they currently are, and councils need to be much braver in using them not just in town centres but in residential estates.

Police forces are massively stretched. In my county of Lincolnshire, the police force has the worst funding formula in the whole country. That is the subject of a review, and the situation has to change, but there are other things one can do. For example, housing associations could use PSPOs and private prosecutions. I have seen that recently, and we know it can work. Private prosecutions,

rapidly used—they are always used by housing associations on nuisance tenants—would send a message: “Unacceptable behaviour has consequences. You will be fined. You will be prosecuted. You will lose your home.”

What is required is not more resources, but a proper focus on using the existing legislative framework and other aspects that are available. If we do that properly, we can make a significant difference, but it is a cultural thing. We have to make it clear to everybody that this selfish, horrific behaviour is unacceptable to communities, to decent, hard-working families and, frankly, to this country.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): We now move to the Front-Bench contributions, starting with the spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats.

10.16 am

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) on securing this important debate.

Liberal Democrats believe that everyone deserves to feel safe in their own homes and walking down their own streets, but for too many that is not something they can rely on. Antisocial behaviour can have a devastating impact on individuals, families and neighbourhoods, causing distress to tenants and landlords. Police force freedom of information requests obtained by the Liberal Democrats last April found that under the previous Government, average police response times to antisocial behaviour incidents increased by 37% from 2021. Some forces took an average of 17.5 hours to attend, if they attended the scene at all. In some ways, that is unsurprising, given that under the last Government 4,500 police community support officers were taken off our streets from 2015 onwards.

Only last April in my Taunton and Wellington constituency, we saw how the outgoing Conservative police and crime commissioner reduced PCSOs by a further 80 in Avon and Somerset, where only 19% of reported antisocial behaviour incidents are attended by the police. I am urging the chief constable to put more officers on the beat in Taunton town centre right now to tackle antisocial behaviour in that environment.

Years of ineffective resourcing under previous Conservative Governments, particularly since 2015, have left police forces overstretched, ending the kind of community policing that is so valuable in tackling antisocial behaviour. The Liberal Democrats stand for bringing back proper community policing and for a tough, evidence-based and therefore effective approach to eradicating antisocial behaviour for the benefit of all decent, law-abiding residents and communities.

Antisocial behaviour can include a range of nuisance and criminal behaviours that cause distress. Examples include noisy, abusive behaviour, vandalism, intimidation, drunkenness, littering, fly-tipping, drug use and excessively barking dogs. Whether someone’s actions can be classed as antisocial behaviour relies heavily on the impact it has on other people, so antisocial behaviour is a complex problem. It has many root causes, which means they all need to be tackled together to effectively address it.

Landlords rightly have important powers to remove tenants who are genuinely damaging property or the surrounding community, and I refer the House to my

experience as a social housing landlord, as declared in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. However, those powers cannot come at the price of putting all tenants at unjustified risk of eviction for no reason. That is why we have long campaigned for an end to no-fault evictions, and we welcome the Government’s legislation to bring that to reality in the Renters’ Rights Bill. We fought hard for a fair definition of antisocial behaviour during consideration of the Renters (Reform) Bill under the previous Government, and we will continue to defend tenants against unfair eviction, which itself can be a form of antisocial behaviour.

Landlords, the police and local authorities rightly consider all the factors when deciding how best to deal with reports of antisocial behaviour. Each report is looked at individually, with consideration given to the suffering of the victims and the impact on the wider community, but just one such incident can lead to eviction from social housing—a form of “one strike and you’re out”, which is in place across the country. That is a vital tool, which landlords need and have, and the Liberal Democrats support it. I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for Mansfield (Steve Yemm) support a similar approach.

Extending the one-strike approach we currently have to three strikes would simply be a soundbite and would make the law weaker, giving comfort and credence to the most antisocial culprits. The best deterrent would be to resource the powers and police forces we already have and to make them work. Simply evicting people on to the streets will not reduce the incidence of ASB—rather, it will move the antisocial behaviour from the house to the street, where all the evidence suggests it will only get worse.

One cause of antisocial behaviour, according to studies such as that by Stansfield in the British Journal of Criminology, is housing instability itself. That is why social housing is critical, not just to provide homes for those who need them, but to create stable communities where people can thrive. Liberal Democrats are actively pushing for 150,000 new social homes per year to be built, which would not only reduce housing instability but ensure that there are enough homes for those who need them.

James McMurdock (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Reform): I appreciate the hon. Gentleman raising the point about stability, and I absolutely agree. In the vast majority of cases, where good people are contributing to society and making the most of their situation, stability goes a long way. But we also have to consider the point about a deterrent being necessary, because we cannot have the good people of this world being held to ransom by the bad. There have to be consequences for the bad, even if we do not necessarily like those consequences. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Gideon Amos: We do need to have a clear and effective deterrent. If we do not have properly working police forces and community policing, we will not get that. How we would fund that is something I will return to in my closing remarks.

Everyone deserves decent accommodation. We must provide that, alongside a new generation of rent-to-own housing—so that people have a stake in the houses they live in, because they will ultimately own them—and

[Gideon Amos]

more key worker accommodation. The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) mentioned the experience in New York, where key worker accommodation for police officers and other community professionals in social housing areas had a massive impact. But that depended on resources being put into the police and public services on a big scale to make it work, and that would be needed here in the UK as well. Together, those things can create the stable, mixed communities that are the antidote to antisocial behaviour.

Sadly, the sell-off of council housing over decades of different Conservative Administrations has left too many estates only for those with the most problems, and with fewer and fewer public services to support the families and communities who need them. If we add to that divisive rhetoric pitting one struggling family against another, in an argument about who deserves the home the most, and we have a race to the bottom for the community concerned.

Instead, we should increase the pitiful level of social housing, inject proper community policing, invest in public services and let landlords use their legal powers strongly and appropriately, including through acceptable behaviour contracts, which were pioneered right back in 2003 in Somerset, Islington and other council areas. Together, those measures will prove the most effective way to tackle antisocial behaviour.

Above all, we need to bring back proper community policing, after its total erosion under recent Conservative Governments, and have more bobbies on the beat. Our manifesto would fund and deliver that by investing in acceptable behaviour contracts; making youth diversion schemes a statutory duty, so that every part of the country has pre-charged diversion schemes for young people; freeing up existing officers' time by creating an online crime agency; drawing up a national recruitment and retention strategy to tackle the shortage of detectives; and abolishing police and crime commissioners, instead investing the savings in frontline policing, including in tougher action on antisocial behaviour.

Andrew Cooper: The hon. Gentleman has talked a lot about what we do about antisocial behaviour after we have discovered that it is taking place, and there is an awful lot of emphasis on what the police can do, but does he agree that it is better to deal with antisocial behaviour before it occurs? It is better to deal with underlying addiction issues, and it is better for social housing providers to put resources into tenancy sustainability, so that new tenants understand the behaviour expected of them before problems occur.

Gideon Amos: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. So many entrenched problems in families and communities need the support of public services and investment in them. If we systematically take away policing, social services support, and local authority support and housing officers, as we have seen with the shrinking of local government over recent years, it is hardly surprising that we get an increase in social problems—we are not investing early on to deal with them. Thank you, Ms McVey, for allowing me to contribute to this important debate.

10.25 am

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms McVey. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) for securing this important debate, because all of us have experienced distressing constituency cases, which are a real problem for our communities. I agree with his description of the issue: it can cause mayhem and misery throughout our local communities.

I also agree that social housing should be a privilege, not a right, and that those houses should be kept in good order. When canvassing in our patch, we have all gone to areas with social housing and seen overgrown gardens with litter and furniture in them. That cannot be right for the people in those houses, and particularly the children, but also for the neighbours. It is simply not right.

It is good to see that we seem to be in violent agreement on both sides of the Chamber on the three-strikes policy, which I will talk about in a second. That seems to be a maximum, not a minimum. The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) argued for a two-strikes policy, and the hon. Member for Mansfield (Steve Yemm) argued for a one-strike policy. I am encouraged by that, because it is fair to say that everyone in the debate so far—I am interested to hear what the Minister will say—has said that we need to do more.

Richard Tice: Competition is a good thing. It may be that the Minister wants “no strikes and you're out”.

Kevin Hollinrake: That might be a bit tricky—people do deserve to live in a house as long as they demonstrate good behaviour.

My predecessor as shadow Secretary of State—now the Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch)—has said:

“Those who break the law, make neighbours' lives a misery, or treat the UK as a hotel they're just passing through, should not be given subsidised housing...The public wants to know that only decent and hardworking people who have contributed to this country are given social housing.”

I agree with that point.

The Minister is a very decent chap, and I am really interested to listen to what he will say, but let us contrast those comments with what the current Secretary of State, the Deputy Prime Minister, has said. She has confirmed Labour's plans to ditch proposals from the Conservative Government to take away social housing from criminals, including those with a history of antisocial behaviour. The Deputy Prime Minister also binned the Conservatives' commitment to prioritise social housing for those with local and British connections. I am very disappointed by that approach, and we need to revisit it. I very much hope the Minister will do that, based on what has been said in this debate. That is all despite the Prime Minister pledging a new clampdown on criminal and violent disorder.

I would like to pick up on what my friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), said in his remarks. I totally agree with many of the points he made, but particularly on right to buy. I grew up back in the '70s in a little town in North Yorkshire with large council estates. I used to deliver milk there as a young

man, and those council estates were not in the best order. Some of the behaviours were not the best, and nor was the condition of some of the houses, because people did not look after them. One of the benefits of right to buy, as well as giving individuals the benefit of right to buy, was that the individuals who bought those homes also improved them significantly. With double glazing, extensions and smart gardens, the quality of those estates increased dramatically. It is therefore a real concern that the Government have decided to cut back and water down that policy and to make it more difficult for people renting social houses to buy them. That cannot be right, particularly when the Deputy Prime Minister herself—this is her policy—has benefited from those very opportunities. It is rank hypocrisy, and it cannot be right.

Gideon Amos: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if the Government are going to provide for the selling off of council houses, they should invest in replacing them, so that we do not have a massive loss of council housing in this country as we have had over the last few decades?

Kevin Hollinrake: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have increased the amount of affordable housing significantly since 2010; there are more than half a million new affordable homes. I do not think he knows that there is a limit on how much money we have. The more social housing we provide, the more expensive that will be. He set out lots of plans that would be very expensive and would take the tax rates in this country through the roof. If that is what people want to vote for, that is what they should vote for, but that is not what I believe. There are finite resources, and we must use them very carefully.

We set out plans to give preference to local residents and to armed forces veterans, but, crucially, to disqualify those with unspent antisocial behaviour convictions and those guilty of other offences. I do not quite agree with the hon. Member for Ashfield that his calls—presumably, both as a member of our party and while in his current party—fell on deaf ears. People may argue that it was not enough, but much work was done while we were in government.

Lee Anderson: The hon. Gentleman is being generous with his time. He talks about my history of being in a different party. If I were still in the Conservative party, I would be sat on those empty Conservative Benches today showing that I care about this important issue.

Kevin Hollinrake: I know that the hon. Gentleman would be. He has always stood up for his constituents and, indeed, for mine and for those of every Member of this House. I always admired that, and I know that he will continue to do it.

In the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, we gave more powers to social landlords and to victims. We have all met victims at our surgeries and been to see the situations that they live in, but now they can demand that the agencies ensure that their problems are dealt with more effectively by bringing those agencies together. We also gave social landlords more power to evict offenders—the people who are guilty of this kind of abuse—and we added resources of £160 million.

Legislation is nothing without implementation, and we need the right policing resources, as a number of Members referred to. I must pick up on the point made by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos), about policing numbers. I agree that we should have more police on our streets, and we have record numbers today, but he cannot simply walk away from some of the choices made by his party and my party post-2010, when police numbers were cut. Looking back now, that was the wrong thing to do, but he cannot walk away from that. Police numbers dipped and then grew again under subsequent Conservative Governments. They now stand at a 50-year record, which is probably a record in anybody's lifetime.

I will pick up on the point about the three strikes policy, which formed the basis of the speech by the hon. Member for Ashfield. He thinks that it should be three strikes, the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness said that it should be two strikes, and the hon. Member for Mansfield, in a fantastic speech, which was most unexpected—he is welcome to join us on the Conservative Benches any time he wants—said that it should be one strike.

The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness made the point that benefits are a privilege, not a right, and that people should have to search for a job and behave well, for example, to get those benefits. We introduced the claimant commitment to do exactly that, so we have taken action in this area, which was of course extremely controversial. We have had to stand up time and again in debates to defend our sanctions policy, because we do not think it is right that people can simply leave the labour market and not try to find work. Again, action was taken there.

The hon. Member for Ashfield talked about where people would live if they were kicked out of these houses, which is a controversial point, of course. That made me think about my mum, who was a social worker who rehabilitated offenders. When people came out of jail, she would try to find them a job and a house. Eventually, she convinced landlords to put up those people, who were trying to get the second chance that most of us would like to ensure that people have. She then built a purpose-built hostel for them, but she had a very clear rule: no drink or drugs while they were in the hostel or one of the bedrooms provided by the landlords. The Probation Service said, "You can't do this because these people have very difficult lives." The hon. Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) pointed that out, and I agree that these people have very complex lives. Nevertheless, my mum always stuck to the line that if the person did not abide by the rule, they could not be in the landlords' guest houses or the hostel. It was "one strike and you're out"—as simple as that. Everybody knew the rule. It was tough love, but it worked. She got many people back on the straight and narrow because she was very straight down the line about it. I am sure that there were no more resources then than there are today. Resources will always be tight, so we have to show tough love to people in that situation and say what the rules will be.

I am keen to hear what the Minister is going to do about this issue. He is a very decent man, but I do not believe that he is going to show the tough love that we need. I fear that he—well, not him personally, but his

[Kevin Hollinrake]

Government—will be too weak, and I think that in 2030, when possibly his ministerial career has ended and a new Minister has taken his place, he will look back in anger at the fact that he did not do more.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I gently remind the Minister to leave a couple of minutes for Lee Anderson to wind up.

10.37 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. Christmas may be over, but I have been visited by the ghost of Christmas future, who has shown me what my life might look like in 2030. I have to say that I would be amazed if I am still a Minister in 2030, but it would be a privilege to have had a long career serving my country. I would love that.

I thank the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) for securing this debate. I am in this Chamber a lot, as are a lot of other hon. Members here, and my favourite debates are not the ones in which individuals bring up very interesting issues that they are interested in—I have done that myself with things that I have a long, enduring interest in—but those that are really rooted in the lives of our constituents. This is one of those.

Colleagues of different political persuasions from different parts of the UK have the same challenge, and we get a lot of correspondence about it in our mailbags. More importantly, people in our communities deal with it every day. They do the decent thing—they go to work, work hard and bring their kids up—and they do not want much other than to be able to get on with a quiet life, but they have to go home to disturbance, noise, aggression, smell or whatever it is. It is so unfair and unjust that they have to live their lives that way. It is right that the Government and the Parliament of the day believe that this issue is important and that we have a role in changing it.

Antisocial behaviour is not merely a nuisance but has devastating personal consequences. It corrodes people's freedom, makes them not want to leave the house, damages their mental health and ultimately undermines their sense of home. That is why tackling antisocial behaviour is an important priority for this Government through our safer streets mission. We have committed on the record to put thousands of neighbourhood police and police community support officers into local communities so that residents have a named officer to turn to when things go wrong.

Hon. Members have talked about the existing powers, which we think need to be augmented through respect orders. We need tough sanctions and proper penalties. Crucially—this is a significant gap at the moment—we need serious and growing penalties for those who persistently offend.

The hon. Member for Ashfield said that social housing is a gem, and I agree. The bedrock of my community is good, decent homes where people can grow up, go to work, thrive and live their lives. It makes it doubly painful when a small number of individuals who have this gem—this thing that many others on the waiting list would be desperate to secure—choose to perpetrate

antisocial behaviour and make their neighbours' lives a misery. It is a double insult. I will address his three strikes point a little later, but I will give a clear response on that.

The hon. Member also talked about the important relationship between central Government, local government, the providers and the police. This is an all-sector approach to try to tackle these individuals and to assemble the right powers, whether through tenancies, the effectiveness of the courts, or providers themselves doing their jobs. Those are points that I will cover.

Any debate that starts with Clement Attlee is a good debate. If we look around the country we can see the impact of his Labour Government and subsequent Labour Governments. Whether it is social housing, our national health service or the minimum wage, we built the basic standards that make people's lives better and help them thrive. This Government will govern in that spirit, and I look forward to the support of the hon. Members for Ashfield and for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice).

Lee Anderson: The Minister makes a good point. He speaks passionately about Clement Attlee. What would Clement Attlee think of the state of our welfare state system and social housing today?

Alex Norris: I could talk all day about Clement Attlee. His policies and politics were rooted in organising in the east end of London. We often forget this, but—well, the hon. Gentleman is no stranger to internal Labour party dynamics. Clement Attlee was a man of exceptional privilege, but he chose to go to the places where life was hardest. He looked at the living conditions of individuals in the east end of London and non-judgmentally sought to change them. He understood that some people had substance abuse issues—they manifested perhaps a little differently compared with today, but it is the same principle—and others had mental health or physical health issues. There was domestic abuse. We are talking about the 1930s, but it is not so different nearly 100 years on. He sought to change those things, but he never sought to divide people into worthy and unworthy people. He would never write people off.

There is an important conversation at the nub of this debate: what is too much? Where is the line? What is tough love? What is an effective way of changing things? The hon. Gentleman talked about not caring where those who are evicted go. I do care, and I will address that point in a little while. There is a balance.

Kevin Hollinrake: The Minister touched on the point about people being unworthy. Can I make the point that my mum would have made? It was not the person who was unworthy as an individual; it was just that they were unworthy of living in a social house, or in her hostel. We have to have tough love to create an incentive for people to behave properly.

Alex Norris: I totally accept that point. The challenge will be, as the hon. Gentleman will know from his leadership in his business career and his senior status in the previous Government, that every individual reacts differently to different circumstances. Like many colleagues, I like sport. No one needs to shout at me about the mistakes I have made. I know the mistakes. I carry them and think about them all the time. I need an arm

around my shoulder. Other people need shouting at. It is about finding the model to make a change, if change is the thing we want, which I think it is for most of us. But people like me, who advocate change and perhaps take a longer lens on it than Conservative Members, cannot lose sight of the fact that in that moment, the people living next door are living in misery. That is why we have to have a line and I will talk about where that might fall.

The shadow Secretary of State should not be surprised by the quality of the contribution by my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Steve Yemm); if he hears him speak on other issues, he will see that the quality is there. With both my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Ashfield here, I had to check whether this was 2024 or 2014—had we got the old band back together? There is a lot of Nottingham and Nottinghamshire here. We have all known each other for a very long time. I associate myself with the comments that my hon. Friend made about Nottinghamshire police and how important it is that we have good policing and we give the police the tools and resources to do that well in our community.

The thing that I took from both my hon. Friend's contribution and that of the hon. Member for Ashfield is just how frustrating the process is. Having sat for 13 years on the local authority and in this place, I know about sitting there yet again saying, "Well, have you done any diary sheets?", the burden of proof constantly being on those who are doing the decent thing, and the seemingly ever-higher mountain to climb to get some degree of justice. Again, that is something I will return to shortly.

I was pleased, as always, to hear the contribution from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). As he said, in Northern Ireland policing is a reserved matter, but the issues are similar. I suspect that people in Bulwell, in my constituency, and Newtownards, in his, are not that different. They want decent treatment, and the vast majority of people in both his community and mine are decent people who do the right thing. That is why it is all the more frustrating when individuals do not. I particularly took his point about reputation; people sometimes talk my community down, and that angers me, because my community is chock full of brilliant people who, whether by being great parents, by being great friends, or by contributing and volunteering, make the world a better place every day. That is why it angers me that a small number of people choose to cause a big amount of disruption.

The hon. Member mentioned legislation. Some colleagues have said that we need legislation; others have said we do not. I will set out the case for why we do. Given that the Renters' Rights Bill is back next Tuesday for its Report stage, this is a good moment—an amendment window—for colleagues to bring forward ideas, and there are also the stages in the other place. Clearly there is a broad interest in this issue, and there could be a lot of very good contributions.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) set out, the rebirth of social housing is at the core of what this Government intend to do. We think that having a social house can be a foundation on which people build their lives. That makes it all the more important that we have appropriate checks and balances for those who do not behave properly in social housing. I will address his point about policing shortly,

because without police, it does not matter what laws or rules we have; we simply will not be able to enforce them.

The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness talked about the broken windows theory, which is interesting and important, but I might challenge it slightly. It is not as simple as saying, "We don't want any broken windows round here." It is saying that when we have broken windows, we fix them: if there is one broken window, a second window is more likely to be broken, because people think, "Hey, you break windows round here." It is about having the resourcing to do that.

The hon. Member also talked about a visible police presence, which is very important to this new Government. There is a trade-off here—as he says, these things need to be paid for. Balancing that is the challenge for the Government of the day, and it will be the challenge for Opposition parties.

James McMurdock: As I understand it, in my local area Essex police has the highest number of police officers in history. But if I speak to residents on the street, I often get exactly the same response: they never see their police officers, or they do not recognise those numbers as fact. Does the Minister agree that we should look at how we use our resources?

Alex Norris: I totally agree with that, and I have that conversation with my constituents. I was the shadow Policing Minister before the election, and I saw the Policing Minister and Home Secretary at the time, both of whom I hold in high regard, tearing their hair out over this question. As the hon. Gentleman says, we have employed more police officers than ever before; we have cut them and then we have added them back. Why are people not happier? The reality is that the funding mechanism squeezed out civilian staff, so that we now have 10,000 fewer police officers in frontline roles. There have never been more police officers—6,000 in this case—sat behind desks, doing things that they were not trained for and that their skills are wasted on. We have to change that, and getting 13,000 more police and police community support officers is part of our neighbourhood policing guarantee.

Kevin Hollinrake: I take the Minister back to the broken windows point. Broken window policing was not just about fixing the windows. He is right to say that that was part of it, because people not caring creates the opportunity for more crime, but it was also about arresting people for low-level crimes and antisocial behaviour. That is an effective and important part of that policy.

Alex Norris: I totally agree with that. To continue the New York example, I think of Red Hook and the courts there: the idea was that they would not just nick people for low-level crimes, but get them through court very quickly and ensure that there were sanctions, as a proper deterrent. Sadly, we are very long way from that. One of my biggest challenges with constituents is that they fear there is no point in staying in the game with the courts system, because they are already getting hearing dates for 2026. That is a real challenge at the root of justice in this country.

[Alex Norris]

The issue starts with social housing providers. We would always want any issues to be nipped in the bud. If someone has done something that they should not have—had a loud party or left a bicycle in the way—then the necessary interaction should be quite an easy one, and there should be a resolution and no recurrence. That reduces antisocial behaviour. We want to see providers do that and they ought to do that.

Similarly, it is right that, when preventive measures fail, landlords can move decisively and quickly to tackle tenants who persistently abuse their tenancies. There are a range of powers already on the statute book, including eviction, but again, as we know from colleagues, that process does not feel like it always works. We have had conversations with social landlords. Of course, we would emphasise that they can apply to a court to remove tenants who carry out antisocial behaviour, but the process can be very difficult. I will talk shortly about how that might be made better.

It starts at allocation. There is a little bit of conversation about who gets access to social housing. Local authorities, including my own, can and do deprioritise tenants who have a history of bad behaviour. The majority—we believe it is about 75%—of local authorities undertake antisocial behaviour or other criminal behaviour-type tests ahead of allocating a social home. I suspect that colleagues may be interested in checking with their local authority whether they are in the three quarters or the quarter, because that is the front door to ensuring that those who have behaved badly in the past do not get access and the opportunity to do it again.

When it comes to eviction, there are powers at the moment—the Housing Act 1985 and the Housing Act 1988—but it is difficult. The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness suggested that there should perhaps not be more legislation, but our plan is for more legislation in this space. Through the Renters Rights' Bill, we will enable housing association landlords to make a claim to a court for repossession immediately in the most serious cases, rather than having to provide a notice period, with all the harm that can happen in those cases.

We will also amend the matters that judges must consider when deciding whether to award possession under the discretionary ground. This is very important—to give judges particular regard to whether tenants have engaged with efforts to resolve their behaviour and the impact on other tenants. Often, as we know from our casework, they simply do not answer letters or let the housing patch manager in. That will be a factor in the future, which is very welcome.

On the point about not being interested where people go, I am interested in that—not least because, as the crow flies, Kirkby to Bulwell is about eight or nine miles. One way or the other, either people being booted out of houses in my constituency end up in that of the hon. Member for Ashfield, or vice versa. That is why we should take an interest. If we can help people to resolve mental health issues, we should do that. If we can help people to address substance abuse issues, we should do that. We cannot pretend that, if we evict them from their housing, they suddenly will not be a problem elsewhere. I do not think that is the case, which is why we must take an interest and want to reduce reoffending and improve and promote rehabilitation.

My particular issue with the three strikes point is the rigidity. I would be very clear with my local authority that, if someone set their neighbour's car on fire or attacked them, or was the organiser and perpetrator of a drugs network from their social house, one strike should be plenty. I would also say that, in a case where perhaps a lone parent is doing the best they can do, and they have a child who is clearly struggling and showing bad behaviours, I would try to solve that problem before thinking that shifting them out of their house would help rather than hinder.

The three strikes system is not flexible enough, and I fear it is at risk of being weaponised. We will have situations where we see both neighbours in the constituency surgery. If there is a hard and fast rule, and someone knows they only have to get three complaints found against their neighbour and they are out, it might promote that type of activity.

Lee Anderson: The Minister is being very generous with his time. He talked about a situation in which somebody might torch somebody's car, where that is a serious enough offence to lose their tenancy. This has actually happened in Ashfield, all over my constituency. We even had a case where we had a house fire by a nuisance tenant, who still was not evicted. It does not work.

Alex Norris: That is why we are making changes within the Renters' Rights Bill. In those cases, the neighbours must tear their hair out and wonder what has to happen for the right thing to be done.

I am conscious of the time remaining, but I wanted to mention our approach to antisocial behaviour and policing more generally, because we must have neighbourhood police back on the street. We have lost neighbourhood policing in this country. The shadow Minister talked about the importance of tackling low-level crime. We have essentially decriminalised retail crime in this country. We have seen an explosion in it, with all that misery. We must have the proper policing resource to get into that space.

That is why the Prime Minister announced on 5 December, through our plan for change, our zero-tolerance approach to antisocial behaviour and, critically, our 13,000 more police and police community support officers. They are named contacts, working on antisocial behaviour action plans with local communities and using new tools, such as the respect orders, to ensure that individuals doing the wrong thing are tackled about their behaviour. There is a straight line across that.

After 13 years of talking to people about problems with their neighbours, my first question—I really cross my fingers behind my back—is whether their neighbour is a private or a social housing tenant. It is much easier with a social housing tenant, because there tend to be behaviour contracts and a legislative framework. If I have to chase a private landlord who might not live in Nottingham—I cannot believe anyone would not, but if not, or if they lived in Derby, for example—or even in Britain, that becomes really hard. We need broader tools that go beyond the ones with which we could work with social housing providers. That will be in our crime and policing Bill in this Session.

To conclude, I thank the hon. Member for Ashfield for securing this important debate and all hon. Members for their contributions to it. We are alive to the issue,

and that is why we are acting through the Renters Rights' Bill and have the policing and crime Bill to come. We are interested in hearing people's ideas. We will always engage with them properly. I have given a sense today of the direction in which we are going, and I look forward to working with colleagues in the future.

10.56 am

Lee Anderson: I thank everyone for turning up to the debate. What have we learned in this Chamber? We have learned that the hon. Member for Mansfield (Steve Yemm) should be the housing spokesman for Reform UK. That is probably the main thing. There are plenty of seats over here on our Benches.

I have learned, actually, that I have been far too soft on this issue. I am astounded. I first debated it in 2015, as a councillor on Ashfield district council, and I said pretty much the same as what I have said today, but I got booed out of the chamber by the Labour group. It is incredible. They disagreed with everything I said. How things have changed over the over the past 10 years or so.

I am disappointed with the attendance in this Chamber today, because this problem touches every single constituency in the United Kingdom. Everyone, every constituency, has a council estate; every constituency has this problem; and every single MP in this House has a lot of casework on this issue. I have the greatest respect for the shadow Minister, and he knows that, but I look at the Conservative Benches behind him and no one has turned up to contribute; I look at the Government Benches and, yes, two Members have turned up, and they made reasonable contributions—but we have a better turnout on our Benches. The point of this place is to change things, and to make people's lives better, easier and safer. If we cannot do that in this Parliament, what is the point of us being here?

I will hold my hands up and apologise for the three strikes policy—far too liberal. I would rather go with the dog-whistle politics of the hon. Member for Mansfield: “one strike and you're out”.

Before I finish, I will just say this to the Minister: the policy is a deterrent. When I say that I do not care where those people live, what I am saying is that, if we have a deterrent where they know they will lose their tenancy, their home, a place to sleep, they will stop that behaviour straight away. I hope, moving forward, that the Government will act on this and make the lives of people on these council estates in Ashfield and all around the country much better.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered social housing tenants and antisocial behaviour.

Heat Batteries: Decarbonising Homes

11 am

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I will call Deirdre Costigan to move the motion. I will then call the Minister to respond. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered decarbonising homes and heat batteries.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. My constituents in Ealing Southall regularly speak to me about the cost of heating their homes. Gas bills have risen astronomically over the past few years, and in freezing weather like this, people are often afraid to turn up their heating in case they are hit with a massive bill. Indeed, research by the House of Commons Library confirms that the annual increase in gas bills in October 2022 was the largest ever recorded, based on records going back to 1970.

How did this happen, and what can we do to reduce people's bills? There is one reason why bills have increased to such a degree: we have become almost completely dependent on Russian gas—on gas internationally, in fact. When Russia, a huge gas supplier, invaded Ukraine, it disrupted global gas supplies. Prices shot up across the world. As a country, we have put all our eggs in one basket. Some 23 million homes have gas boilers, and 85% of us depend on gas to heat our homes, so we had no option but to pay higher prices. It is a basic mistake that anyone can see if they think about it. For years we lived off cheap gas, until we were addicted to it. Then, when supplies were disrupted, we were left at the mercy of higher prices.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): The hon. Member is making a strong point, and I thank her for secured this really important debate. I represent a very rural area where homes have depended on oil-fired heating systems off grid. There is a growing awareness about the transition to renewable alternatives. However, for some, this shift is seen as more of a threat than an opportunity—I have lots of casework on the matter—so engaging consumers has to be a priority. Heat pumps are the lowest-carbon heating solution and should therefore reward homes with lower energy costs. Does the hon. Member agree that the Government should make rebalancing gas and electricity tariffs a priority, to encourage more consumers to upgrade to heat pumps?

Deirdre Costigan: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention; I will come to that point later in my speech. I know that the Government are giving this much consideration.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for her contribution; she is making a name for herself in the House on this issue. Does she agree that if we are to reach our targets, we must assist homeowners, particularly those who are older? Does she feel that the Government should provide financial assistance so that we can achieve her goals?

Deirdre Costigan: I thank the hon. Member for his support for Backbench Business in this place, which is very much appreciated by all Members. I certainly agree on the need for financial support; I will touch on that point later. I expect the Minister will too, as there has been a significant move forward over the past six months.

As I have explained, we have become addicted to gas over a number of years, which is why my constituents in Ealing Southall are consistently paying higher energy prices and struggling to heat their homes. We should have started work years ago on breaking our addiction to gas by investing in our own renewable energy and upgrading our homes to use that energy, but the previous Government never had the bravery to take action at the scale that is needed. Instead, they stopped us producing cheap British-made energy by blocking the building of onshore wind farms and by cutting funding for solar panels.

The previous Government also stopped us upgrading our homes to protect them from the rising cost of gas. They slashed grants for loft and cavity wall insulation and scrapped the zero-carbon homes standard for new homes. As a result, more than 1 million new homes have been built with lower energy efficiency standards, and people are paying higher bills than they should. We continue to have the leakiest homes in Europe, with just 12,000 homes insulated last year, compared with up to 2.5 million a year under the last Labour Government.

The Carbon Trust estimates that those decisions by the Conservative Government have added at least £3 billion to UK gas bills. That is why my constituents are paying through the nose to keep warm today. What can we do about that? Thankfully, the new Government are already taking action to wean us off gas. We have set up Great British Energy, ended the block on onshore wind farms and kick-started plans to become a world leader in floating offshore wind. These are the brave steps needed to ensure that by 2030 we become fully energy self-sufficient and that 95% of the power we generate is clean energy, ending our reliance on gas and on decisions taken in Moscow.

When it comes to weaning our home heating systems off gas, the recent Budget invested £3.4 billion as a first step towards the new Government's warm homes plan. As a start, 300,000 homes will benefit from upgrades next year, with grants for heat pumps and support for renters and low-income households.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing such an important debate; it is incredibly disappointing that not a single Conservative MP has turned up to listen. Does my hon. Friend agree that our transition away from fossil fuel heating must include domestic network ground source heat pumps at a much broader scale, including in social housing? Heat pumps are essential to the transition. The largest producer of ground source heat pumps, Kensa, is in my constituency and is ready, willing and able to support that transition.

Deirdre Costigan: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I am well aware of the company he mentions and will talk about it later in my remarks. It is a great example to build on.

We need to wean our home heating systems off gas, in the same way that we need to wean the country off gas when it comes to renewable energy. The recent

Budget invested £3.4 billion as a first step in the warm homes plan. Heat pumps, which will benefit from some of that money, are a great way to wean us off gas. They use electricity rather than gas, so they can be fed from home-grown energy from our wind and solar farms.

Just 1% of UK homes use a heat pump, compared with 60% in Norway. That is a real indictment of the previous Government's inaction. It is fantastic that this Government are systematically removing barriers to heat pumps. We have increased funding for the boiler upgrade scheme by £30 million this year and will be doubling it from April. We are removing the need for other home upgrades before households can get that funding, and we are changing planning requirements and the 1 metre rule so that heat pumps are easier to install.

Sarah Dyke: Like many residents of rural areas on an off-grid oil heating system, my constituent Nicholas in Sparkford desperately wants to change to a heat pump, but it would cost him £19,000 to transition. The cost is preventing so many people in rural areas from decarbonising their home. I appreciate that the Government are taking steps to help, but in rural areas the cost is simply too high. What can the Government do to incentivise people who live in rural areas to decarbonise their home?

Deirdre Costigan: As I have laid out, the Government have already taken steps to increase the funding to transition to heat pumps. I am sure the Minister will have more to say on rural communities and the particular barriers they face.

Although heat pumps are extremely important in the move to wean us off gas, they do not work for every home. An estimated 20% of homes are unsuitable for heat pumps. We need to do more to break down the reasons why people can be reluctant to choose them. Air source heat pumps need outdoor space. Many of my Ealing Southall constituents live in small terraced homes or flats and do not have much outdoor space, so a heat pump is not a viable or attractive option. Many people have repurposed the space that used to house their hot water tank.

That is where innovative British firms such as Kensa in Cornwall and Tepeo in Reading come in. Both companies use heat batteries, using the same science that is behind hand-warmer packs, to store thermal energy until it is needed. Tepeo's zero emission boiler, ZEB, uses a heat battery that automatically buys energy at cheaper times of day and releases it when required, reducing energy bills. Users do not need an outside pump; they just need a box about the size of a gas boiler. Because of their small size and their ability to plug and play without needing to do replumbing, heat batteries are a good solution for heating homes in built-up urban environments like London, including parts of Ealing Southall.

Kensa uses shared ground source heat loops that are connected to whole streets or blocks of flats. The energy is connected from the ground, is produced in networked heat pumps in each of the linked houses or flats and is then stored in Kensa's Sunamp heat batteries. No outdoor space is needed, and it replaces the need for a hot water tank.

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

Esther McVey (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon. Gentleman intervenes, may I remind Members that interventions should be concise and should not be speeches?

Tom Hayes: I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. I was lucky recently to visit Kensa's air source heat pumps in Sutton Dwellings in Chelsea. I have also visited Tepeo's factory; it is great to see the chief executive officer in the Public Gallery today. Does my hon. Friend agree that for heat batteries to enjoy the same penetration of the market as heat pumps, it is important that they benefit from VAT relief and the same levels of subsidy so that we can decarbonise our heating?

Deirdre Costigan: I absolutely agree, and I will come on to exactly those points. Kensa's approach also uses ground source heat technology, aligned with heat batteries—a cheap and efficient way of rolling out heat pumps at scale. My hon. Friend mentions a visit he made; another example is that Kensa has replaced direct electric heaters with shared ground loops alongside heat batteries in more than 270 flats across three tower blocks in Thurrock. Residents' bills have reduced by more than 60%, which is a huge saving. Both those technologies can wean us off gas. They are examples of the kind of British manufacturing and innovation that we need to support to create good-quality jobs. However, barriers remain, and I hope that the Minister will consider ways of addressing them.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for giving way and for securing this important debate. My constituency has one of the highest levels of off-gas-grid properties in the UK, with over a third of my constituents dependent on heating oil to keep their homes warm. Does the hon. Member agree that it is vital that the Government bring forward plans to help off-grid homes to decarbonise not only to help the environment, but to help to bring their bills down?

Deirdre Costigan: I am sure that the Minister will have more to say on that when she responds.

Heat batteries in the UK currently face a significant disadvantage compared with heat pumps as they are not eligible for a grant under the boiler upgrade scheme. I know the Minister is continuing to look at how she can maximise the benefits of the scheme and I hope she will also look at whether new technologies such as heat batteries can also be supported.

Unlike heat pumps, heat batteries are not on the list of energy-saving materials that qualify for VAT reductions, so extending VAT relief to heat batteries would help to heat the 20% of homes currently missing out. I have written to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to ask him to consider reducing VAT for heat batteries, and I hope the Minister might work with him on that.

There are barriers to installing networked ground source heat pumps that use heat batteries, including planning considerations and the need to adopt a street-by-street approach that can upgrade hundreds of homes in one go. The Minister has already committed to changing planning rules for air source heat pumps. I hope that she will consider whether changes also need to be made for networked ground source pumps and

that she will include networked heat pumps allied with heat batteries in the forthcoming low-carbon flexibility road map she is working on.

To give certainty to British businesses investing in innovative technologies such as heat batteries, we need to ensure that there are consistent heating requirements for new homes being built. The Minister will shortly be bringing forward the new future homes standard to end the scandal of gas boilers still being installed in new homes. I hope the standard will include heat batteries and other emerging technologies.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for giving way; she has been very generous and has brought a genuinely important issue to the House. She mentioned the future homes standard. According to a calculation I carried out, if every new home built since 2015, when the Conservatives cancelled the zero-carbon homes programme, had solar panels on the roof, we would have saved around 30 MW of energy—enough to obviate the need for an entire gas-fired power station. As a complement to what she is arguing for, I hope that she would support solar panels on every new house. My constituents in Taunton and Wellington cannot understand why that is not already a regulation.

Deirdre Costigan: We do not have solar panels feeding into our energy system to that much greater degree because of the last Government; it is as simple as that.

I will continue with the changes that I would like the Minister to consider. Lastly, I would like her to think about heat pumps and heat batteries and the way they both currently use electricity. Electricity can make them more expensive than gas boilers, which is one of the big barriers to consumers. It sounds strange, but because of the way the market works, the price of electricity depends on the price of gas. It is surely unfair that a levy is paid on the electricity used by heat batteries, but those levies are not paid back when and if they feed back into the grid.

We need to look at the electricity market to see if there are ways of splitting off the price of cheaper renewable energy from the price of gas to reflect the true value of energy storage. I hope to hear more from the Minister on that point, as part of the review on the electricity market that she has committed to undertake.

Every family and business in the country has paid the price of Britain's dependence on foreign gas markets. Retrofitting homes with the help of heat batteries is just one of the range of actions we need to take to bring down bills and keep Britain's leaky homes warm. In just six months, the Government have already made huge advances in increasing our energy security, and I look forward to hearing more from the Minister on her plans to harness new technologies to protect the cost of heating our homes from decisions made in other countries.

11.20 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh): I thank everyone for their insightful contributions, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan), who I know works hard for her constituents, for bringing this issue to our attention.

[Miatta Fahnbulleh]

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point to the inheritance that we are grappling with. The reality is that for too many people, energy is simply unaffordable. That is a reality that the last Government were willing to accept; it is not one that we think is tenable or that we are willing to accept. Every voice, every piece of new technology and every benefit must be considered as we try to reduce our reliance on gas and make our way forwards towards clean power by 2030, so I thank my hon. Friend for her research and work on heat batteries.

Heating our homes via low-carbon means is key to our efforts to tackle not just emissions but fuel poverty and the high cost of living that is biting across the country. As we enter the colder months of 2025, we are acutely aware of the financial pressures that families are under when heating their homes, which is why it is critical that we continue to move quickly towards cheaper, cleaner and more secure methods of heating homes for everyone across the country.

The Government were elected on an energy promise: to deliver warmer homes with lower energy bills for families across the country. Decent homes are the foundation of decent lives, and our warm homes plan is driven by the simple principle that every household deserves the security of a home that they can afford to heat.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): I welcome the debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) on this important topic. The warm homes plan currently being rolled out by the Government is particularly welcome for those of us in Cornwall with poor energy-efficient homes. Can the Minister outline the steps that she is taking to accelerate the roll-out, so that as many households as possible, particularly those with vulnerable elderly people and young people—who have access to the worst-insulated homes—can feel the immediate benefits?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I will go on to outline the steps that we are taking, because we recognise that the plan is critical to dealing with the challenges across the country.

I want to emphasise why we got here; my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall made that point very well. Let us remember that Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine exposed our country to our egregious over-reliance on international gas markets. When prices rocketed, the British people suffered. That is why we have made our strategy to reduce reliance on gas a central plank of this Government, and we can do that in two ways.

First, we want to reduce reliance on gas within the electricity system. One of the Prime Minister's key missions is to make Britain a clean energy superpower. We have taken immediate action by lifting the ban on onshore wind within our first 72 hours in government, setting up the new mission control at the heart of Government, and setting up Great British Energy—a publicly owned company that will invest in clean home-grown energy.

Secondly, we want to reduce our reliance on natural gas for directly heating our homes, which is why this debate is so important. Over 80% of UK homes currently use gas, which is one of the highest proportions in the world. Cleaner heating is therefore a huge part of Britain's

path to energy independence. The good news is that if we get this right—there is a lot we need to do to get it right—it is also a route for us to deliver cheaper energy for people's homes.

Although other technologies such as heat batteries might have a role to play—I will say more about that technology specifically in a second—we already know that heat pumps can be an effective and affordable way of moving forward. We know that heat pumps are three times more efficient than traditional gas boilers, and because they run on electricity, people can achieve lower bills by integrating them with smart tariffs. To the point made by the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke), we understand that we need to do more work to make sure that it is cost-effective for people who make the choice to have clean heat. Thinking about the balance between gas prices and electricity prices is a key part of how we try to do that.

Heat pump uptake is increasing. Figures for the boiler upgrade scheme show that the number of applications and redemptions in October 2024 was the highest of any month since the scheme began. Critically for hon. Members who raised key questions about rural communities and homes that are off grid, we think that heat pumps are a viable option in rural communities. Actually, 54% of BUS grants went to homes in rural communities, so consumers agree with us.

We now need to make it as easy and viable as possible for people to go on this journey. That is why we are announcing and putting in place a raft of measures to help us to accelerate the pace of our warm homes plan. We have removed the outdated 1-metre rule, giving households more flexibility to install heat pumps. We are almost doubling the boiler upgrade scheme budget for next year to £295 million.

We are looking at further ways in which we can make the up-front cost of installing a heat pump much cheaper, drawing on some of the real innovation in the market, such as Kensa, which my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall mentioned. We are supporting the supply chain by introducing a reformed clean heat market mechanism on 1 April this year. We are investing more than £5 million in Ideal Heating as the first award from our heat pump investment accelerator competition, and we are doing the critical job of training installers through our heat training grant.

Let me come to heat batteries. We recognise that heat pumps will be the solution for many households and we need to make sure that they are as easy and affordable as possible for those households to install, but we also recognise that for some households they will not be the right solution. We also know that the landscape is changing massively, with innovation and new technology in train. That is why I can confirm that the Government are keeping several alternative electric heating technologies under close review as the supporting evidence develops. For us, this is about taking a technology-agnostic view on the market, pairing the most suitable technology with the home.

We recognise that heat batteries are a promising alternative electric heating technology. That is why we have launched the homes for net zero project, which is aiming to monitor the performance of up to 50 heat batteries in existing homes. We are expecting the results of that later this year. The key thing for us as we make the decision is whether it is a good deal for consumers.

Is it efficient, is it cost-effective, and does it deliver the right outcomes—the outcomes that we need to see in people's homes? As we build that evidence base and we build our confidence that it is the right proposition for consumers, we will look to review the policy framework, including subsidies, as we move forward.

Let me come to the warm homes plan. The Government are committed to being bold and ambitious to deliver the progress that we know is so badly needed on this agenda. When we were elected, we were clear that we needed to get straight back to work with the warm homes plan. In September, we announced plans that would lift more than 1 million households out of fuel poverty, by consulting on the minimum energy efficiency standards for all rented homes.

We also announced new schemes to help, in particular, low-income households—homeowners and private renters. This is through our warm homes local grant and our warm homes social housing fund, which closed for applications last November. We have confirmed £1 billion from the national wealth fund, Barclays UK corporate bank and Lloyds Banking Group to support housing associations to provide warmer, more energy-efficient homes.

In November, we went further. Alongside the policies that I have talked about, we confirmed initial funding for our warm homes plan, which means that next year

up to 300,000 homes will benefit from upgrades, backed by £3.2 billion of investment. In December, we worked with housing colleagues to launch a major consultation on energy performance certificate reforms, which aims to deliver fundamental improvements so that the system better supports both consumers and our wider ambitions.

Let me conclude by saying that this Government understand the urgency of the situation, so we are moving at pace. That means that we are open-minded and collaborative. We are willing to work with anyone who will help us to drive the transition at the pace and scale that we need. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall can see that that is absolutely at the heart of the approach that we are taking. I look forward to working with her, with industry colleagues and with other Members across the House to think about the innovation and the steps that we need to take to make progress on this agenda, so that in the end we do the thing that we were elected to do, which is to ensure that we are delivering on the energy promise that we committed—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Scotland: Transport Links

[MRS EMMA LEWELL-BUCK *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered transport links between Scotland and the rest of the UK.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Lewell-Buck, for the first time. I congratulate you on your position.

I am pleased to have secured this debate to highlight the significance and importance of improving transport links between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. My constituency sits in the very south of Scotland, right next to England. That is one of the reasons why I was such a passionate campaigner for remaining in the Union in the 2014 independence referendum, and why I continue to believe firmly in Scotland's place within the UK.

In the Scottish Borders, many of my constituents have family just a few miles away in England, and most have friends just over the border. People often head to England for days out and to socialise. Some travel south every day to work; others come north to do the same. Others regularly go south for medical treatment, especially since the SNP wrecked Scotland's NHS.

Our lives are interconnected, so our transport network must be appropriately connected too. People's everyday lives depend on good, safe, reliable and affordable transport across the Borders and down to England. Today, I want to talk about the railway and road connections between Scotland and the rest of the UK. I will raise some of the key routes, the challenges to improve them and the opportunities that are available if we do so.

The Borders railway has undoubtedly been a great success story since it was restored between Edinburgh and Tweedbank. For many years, I have been working hard with local campaigners to see it extended to Hawick and Newcastleton, and on to Carlisle. I have been doing everything I can to keep making the positive case for the extension.

I firmly believe that the extension of the Borders railway would be a game changer for our local area. In the general election campaign last year, I pledged to work hard to deliver the extension that we all want to see. I will keep my promise to local people by spending the next parliamentary term focused on advancing that project. I am seeking to bring together a cross-party consensus about the importance of the extension. I will work constructively with the Scottish Government where possible, and I intend to have open dialogue with the new Labour Government on what we can do to achieve that project together.

This does not need to be a party political issue. It can be something on which we work together in the interests not only of the Borders but of the south of Scotland and the north of England too. Indeed, the previous United Kingdom Conservative Government worked constructively with the Scottish Government, and in March 2021 agreed to jointly invest £10 million for a study to look at the feasibility of extending the railway to Hawick and Newcastleton, and on to Carlisle.

Unfortunately, I have to say with real regret that it appears that the Labour Government simply do not grasp the importance of extending the Borders railway

and are not willing to do what is right not only for the people of the Borders but for commuters and people travelling between Scotland and England. I have not been encouraged by the early signs from the new Government regarding the Borders railway extension.

After writing to seek assurances about Labour's commitment to the project, I received a response from the Minister of State for Rail, Lord Peter Hendy, who said that Labour will "review" the previous transport commitments and "assess" this proposal. He was not able to comment on the next steps for the scheme. I find that response very poor, considering the importance to our economy and our public transport network of the extension of the Borders railway to the wider area. Better rail services would be a fantastic boost to people across the Scottish Borders.

The Borders railway extension could unlock economic potential, create thousands of jobs, improve social mobility and transform the local rail network, yet despite the previous Conservative Government's commitment to provide funding for a feasibility study, the new UK Labour Government have refused to give the same commitment. Many local people have told me that they now feel that the Labour Government are betraying the people of the Borders by putting the feasibility study on hold.

At the very least, it is worth progressing the feasibility study so that we can establish the most effective and efficient way to proceed. It is crucial that the feasibility study goes ahead so that a proper assessment of the railway can be undertaken. I will continue to work with the Campaign for Borders Rail to further that project.

I will also talk about other train services from Berwick-upon-Tweed, and the importance of that station to the Scottish Borders and south-east Scotland. There are proposals by the rail industry and Network Rail to change the frequency and journey times from Berwick-upon-Tweed to London. Although some routes from Berwick going north are set to be improved, the number of trains going south to London will fall substantially. The proposed changes to the timetable will mean that there will be just 11 trains on weekdays, down from 15, and only eight on weekends, down from 12. That means that at least 25% fewer trains will go from Berwick to London, which will not help people travelling south for work and will not allow people to get around the country easily.

I raised my concerns with the rail industry, and particularly with London North Eastern Railway, as recently as this morning, but I am afraid the response has been extremely disappointing. The industry believes that the changes will be positive because there will be faster and more frequent services from Newcastle and Edinburgh. That will undoubtedly improve connectivity for passengers in those cities, but I fear that rail travellers from small town UK and the rural communities that such stations serve will yet again be left behind.

Moving on from the railways, I also want to raise the importance of roads to rural areas and the wider economy.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Before the hon. Member moves on, when it comes to Scotland and northern England transport links, does he have a view on the practice of Avanti, which runs the west coast route from London Euston to Glasgow? Whenever there is any kind of problem on the line north of Preston, whether it be in north Lancashire, Cumbria or

the south of Scotland, Avanti's habit is to stop all trains at Preston, so everywhere between Preston and Glasgow, be it Oxenholme or Motherwell, has no service. Does he think that Avanti is in breach of at least the principle of its contract in failing to serve north Lancashire, Cumbria and Scotland?

John Lamont: I am grateful to the hon. Member for raising that point. I will not comment on the legality of whether Avanti has breached its contract, but I think he is making the point that there is an issue, or at least a perception, that train companies do not think that customers and passengers north of Manchester or north of Birmingham are as important as those in the south. We need to remember, however, that the communities in the northern part of the UK and in Scotland, and the passengers travelling on those services, are in many cases much more dependent on those services because there are so few alternative services and options if there is disruption on the trains, so he makes a very important point.

As I said, I will move on from the railways and talk a bit about the importance of roads to rural areas and the wider economy. More than 60% of visitors to Scotland from the rest of the United Kingdom arrived by car in 2023, showing how vital our roads are to tourism and the Scottish economy. Fixing the roads should be high on the agenda of both this Labour Government and the SNP Government in Holyrood.

For many years, however, the SNP has failed to invest in local roads. The state of the roads in the Scottish Borders, sadly, has declined substantially on the nationalists' watch. The dire state of our roads is putting public safety at risk and increasing the cost of driving as more cars need to be repaired after hitting potholes. Although it always tries to deflect blame, it is on the SNP to step up and give councils the cash they need to fix our roads. Councils across Scotland cannot fix their roads because the SNP Government keep cutting their funding.

Unfortunately it looks as though Labour is following a very similar approach to the SNP. Last year, we heard the devastating news that Labour has decided to scrap plans to dual the A1 in Northumberland, after many years of campaigning by me, other MPs and many local people and businesses who rely on that vital road and are desperate to see it improved. This road connects the Scottish Borders to England. It is vital for our economy, and it supports jobs and helps to promote trade. That is yet another terrible decision in Labour's Budget that will have damaging consequences for workers, families and businesses across the Borders.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is doing a fantastic job of representing his constituents. How would he fund that project—the Labour Government have said that the money is not there just now—or the feasibility study of extending the Borders railway to Carlisle? Where will the funding come from for those projects?

John Lamont: The funding for the Borders railways feasibility study is part of a legally binding agreement: the Borderlands growth deal between the United Kingdom Government and the Scottish Government. That money was allocated by my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell),

who is sitting behind me, when he was the Secretary of State for Scotland. The money has been allocated within UK Government budgets for that feasibility study. The Scottish Government committed to that money on the back of the UK Government's commitment, and similarly the UK Government committed to it on the back of the Scottish Government's commitment. The money is undoubtedly there; it just needs to be unlocked. That is my frustration, and the frustration of my local authority, the Scottish Borders council.

In relation to the A1 dualling, there is a cross-party campaign to get that road improved. That is why, in response to the Labour Government's decision to scrap that dualling, the hon. Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), described it as deeply disappointing, I think—he shares my concern and we have the same view on this.

We need to see investment in infrastructure so that our constituents in rural areas, such as the Borders or North Northumberland, can benefit from the same type of investment in transport as the constituents of the hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) enjoy in Edinburgh. Labour Members have a metropolitan outlook in terms of ensuring that only cities get good transport, but they should not forget the rural communities, such as those in the Borders. I suspect, looking at the representation on the Labour Benches, that we will get a very skewed central-belt view of transport and connectivity.

I fear that the Labour Government's previous decisions give us no hope that other essential roads will see the improvements that they need, such as the A68, which runs from Darlington up to near Edinburgh, or the A7, which stretches from Carlisle to Edinburgh. Those roads barely seem to register on either Labour's or the SNP's list of priorities. I will keep campaigning for better roads across the Borders, despite Labour and the SNP refusing to make the improvements that motorists need. We need to see much more ambition from the Government here at Westminster, and at Holyrood, to advance Scotland's infrastructure.

Railways, roads and other transport routes between Scotland and England are vital, not just for people to get around, but to maintain and enhance the connections between our people; to allow families to visit each other and go on holidays across the UK; to help aspirational business owners to engage with customers and clients in other parts of the country; and to allow people to easily work and socialise wherever they live in Scotland or the rest of the UK. Beyond the direct and immediate impact on people, better transport routes will improve our economy, raise productivity, and help to contribute more to tax revenues and improve public services.

At a time when we desperately need to raise levels of economic growth, investing in infrastructure is an ideal way to do that. Better transport routes would also help to protect our environment by helping us to reach net zero faster by encouraging more people to use public transport and by reducing emissions. There are a whole host of benefits that could be achieved by improving transport links across our United Kingdom. That is what we should aspire to: a more connected country where people can travel freely between Scotland and the rest of the UK for work, to visit family, or to spend time with friends, wherever they are on these islands.

2.43 pm

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Lewell-Buck, as you are from South Shields—I have some family there too and it is a wonderful place. I thank the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for securing today's important debate; he spoke eloquently about transport in his constituency. I gently remind him, as he mentioned net zero, that it was the Conservative Government who had an offshore wind allocation round that secured no bids when we desperately need clean, cheap and fixed-price electricity. I also gently remind him that, last time I checked, many of these transport links were under the supervision of the Conservative Government from 2010 to 2019, with some art and part assistance from another party in the early years.

Improving connectivity between Glasgow and the rest of the UK is a topic that is deeply important to my constituents and one that I have been working hard on since I was elected in July. Glasgow is Scotland's largest city, and as we head into its 850th anniversary celebrations this year, we have much to celebrate: a vibrant city with so much economic and cultural potential. Improving connectivity in Glasgow and England is crucial to realising that potential; a high-quality inter-city service attracts investment and talent. It is critical for people in our vibrant creative, scientific, cultural and energy sectors; for people coming to Glasgow to work; for people coming to enjoy our city's brilliant cultural, sporting and night-time economy; and for people visiting friends and family.

I will first deal with links to cities in the east served by the east coast main line. Previously, Glasgow had an excellent direct train service heading to the east of England, connecting it with cities such as Newcastle, Durham and York. In 2010, there were 10 direct trains running on the service, run by both LNER and CrossCountry; now there is only one service per day. Under the Tory regime, nine out of 10 services have been cut—yet another blow to getting economic growth into Glasgow.

I got in touch with CrossCountry to ask about the severe reductions to its service and to have a chat about increasing the frequency of that service. I am disappointed and a little surprised that I have yet to receive a reply, and I trust I will receive one soon. I did, however, meet the chief executive of LNER to discuss the decision made back in April to scrap the last remaining service connecting Glasgow and the north-east that it operates. I was clear that I was in full favour of any attempt to revive this service, and I would be keen to engage with the Minister on this matter.

I am aware that Lumo has made an application to run a service, extending from Edinburgh to Glasgow Queen Street. I am keen to hear more about that proposal, as it fundamentally demonstrates that there is untapped demand for direct travel from Glasgow to the north-east of England and Yorkshire. I am interested in anything that increases connectivity between the north and north-east of England, and Glasgow.

With nine out of 10 direct train services cut over the last few years, we need improvements. The Conservatives' record of connectivity for Glasgow is, I am afraid, nothing short of abysmal. May I say to hon. Members from Scotland that it is not just a question for Glasgow? It affects people across the west coast of Scotland, including those in the countryside, who rely on those services.

Let us talk briefly about connectivity to the north-west, the midlands and London, which is also very important for Glasgow. For many years, Avanti West Coast has operated that service, and it has—to be charitable—left a lot to be desired. Even the last Conservative Government accepted that the performance was appalling. Their response to that appalling service has always puzzled me somewhat; in autumn 2023, they awarded Avanti West Coast a nine-year extension. Avanti's response was to cut the services in the run up to Christmas—I thought it was only good children who got presents at Christmas, but there we are.

Problems persist. Between July and September 2024, only 41% of Avanti services were deemed to be on time. Reliability is crucial for such an important service, and currently it is not acceptable. Our Labour Government have inherited an absolute mess of a transport system, after years of neglect and poor policymaking. The Government are absolutely committed to boosting economic growth in all areas of the UK, including Glasgow and Scotland, and that is something I am 100% proud to support. In order to achieve this, we must be ambitious in our plans to improve transport.

It is essential that Glasgow is not left behind due to poor transport links with the major cities in England. It will take time; 14 years of Tory failure have left our transport system in a mess. I am reassured that the Government are committed to working hard to get our railways back on track. I fully support those efforts, which will take time to yield results, but we must stick with them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (in the Chair): Order. As hon. Members can see, lots of Members want to speak in this debate. Could you please stick to an informal four-minute time limit, so that everybody gets in?

2.49 pm

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Lewell-Buck. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on securing this important debate.

I was a teenage newspaper reporter when I was first confronted with the horrific reality of a collision between a car and an articulated lorry. A senior policeman told me that there had been four fatalities when a lorry and car crashed on the A75, just outside my home town of Stranraer in what is now my Dumfries and Galloway constituency. The policeman added, "I know there's four dead only because I can see four right feet." Forty years later, that same A75 continues to exact an awful toll, for the total traffic volumes it carries are much bigger and the artics larger too. Tragically, there have been two more fatalities recently, when cars and lorries collided on the A75 in September and November.

The A75 is gloriously titled "the Euro route", but we must set aside any notions of a multi-laned ribbon of shining asphalt. It is largely two lanes and filled with dangerous bends, blind dips and adverse camber, and grinds through villages that should have been bypassed decades ago. The A75 even has a light-controlled cattle crossing, despite the fact that it services the key port of Cairnryan and carries perhaps—estimates vary—as much as 60% of goods into and out of Northern Ireland.

Transport is devolved to the Scottish Government, so why on earth are we here, in this place, discussing this road? It will be news to the Minister, but the previous Conservative Administration undertook a review of UK connectivity and identified the A75 as being of national significance. Yes, it is the key traffic artery running through Dumfries and Galloway but it is also the critical link between Northern Ireland, Scotland and England. It is screaming out for improvements, yet the road is treated with supreme indifference by the Scottish Government. They complained that the UK Government even looking at the A75 was a “power grab”, and alleged that we were trampling on devolution by launching a connectivity review. Officials were ordered not to co-operate with that review, which was led by Sir Peter Hendy, now Lord Hendy. That meant that he had to “drive” the full length of the A75, inch by painful inch, using only Google Street View.

Since my election I have been trying to find out what is happening with money that the last Conservative Government earmarked for improvements to the A75. I have established that the money has not been swallowed up by the questionable fiscal black hole that the Chancellor blames for all ills, but with the Department for Transport here convinced that the issue sits in Edinburgh and Edinburgh inscrutable at best, we have an impasse.

The First Minister of Scotland, no doubt motivated by looming Holyrood parliamentary elections, has deigned to visit the A75 to see for himself how overwhelmed it truly is. Labour boasts about a reset of relations with the Scottish Government yet, sadly, the Secretary of State for Scotland was unable to take up my suggestion that, given the supposed love-in between Dover House and Bute House, he should share a car with First Minister John Swinney on that visit. Mr Swinney has said that he now understands the depth of feeling about the A75—empty words that leave those on both sides of the North channel frustrated by the state of this vital cross-border road.

Will the Minister give my constituents an update on where the UK taxpayers’ money for the A75 has gone? Will she press the UK Department for Transport to accept that it has a stake in seeing a rolling programme of improvements on the A75, on both safety and economic grounds? The current mode of this Government is to devolve and forget, to throw a block grant up north to Edinburgh and then wash their hands of the matter. That is not what devolution is about. The A75 is a classic example of where the UK Government ought to act in the best interests of the people of Britain and not allow devolution to be an excuse for inaction—livelihoods, and indeed lives, are truly at risk.

2.54 pm

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Lewell-Buck. I thank the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for securing this important debate, not least because it provides an opportunity for me to talk about the challenges facing my constituency of Bathgate and Linlithgow. Although this debate is focused on transport links between Scotland and the rest of the UK, it would be remiss to ignore the challenges facing smaller rural communities—and, yes, we do have them in the central belt—that rely on local transport links for people to make their way to Edinburgh or Glasgow for onward travel to elsewhere in the UK.

A prime example of the challenges is Winchburgh, one of the fastest growing villages in Scotland, which will soon be a town. However, the residents cannot even get a train to Edinburgh, never mind across the border to England. Many families moved there in the full expectation of regular and reliable transport, but there has been no such ambition from the Scottish Government. Since 2012, there has been a question over how a station will be funded, after Transport Scotland prevented West Lothian council from making delivery of the station a condition of planning consent. Changes have already been made on the main line Glasgow-Edinburgh timetable for a stop in Winchburgh, so the train could stop there—but there is no station to stop at. That means people have to take almost an hour on the bus or they jump into their cars to get there.

Although there has been recent progress, it has been far too slow. Scottish Government Ministers must prioritise that station and ensure its delivery. I take my hat off to the villagers who have campaigned tirelessly for years to keep this issue in the public spotlight. It must be a thorn in their sides to watch the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Fiona Hyslop—their constituency MSP—open stations and train lines across the country while they continue to fight for a station in Winchburgh.

Now we hear of another challenge facing railway users: ScotRail’s plans to reduce ticket office hours at 54 stations, including Linlithgow. The proposals raise serious concerns, particularly around safety and accessibility for passengers. Many women have expressed a preference for well-staffed stations, where they feel safer. The reduction in hours, particularly in the evening, risks exacerbating safety concerns. In addition, the proposed cuts undermine efforts to ensure accessibility for disabled passengers, many of whom rely on assistance provided by station staff.

On top of that, there are rising rail fares, with a recent hike of 8.7%. That continues to make public transport less accessible and affordable for many. While railways face all those challenges, local communities are further impacted by significant reductions in bus services—of 44% since the SNP took over in 2007. Buses are often treated as the poor relation to trains when it comes to investment from the Scottish Government, but they are a vital way to keep local communities connected, linking people to train services and airports. This lack of joined-up, strategic thinking by the Scottish Government is having a significant impact.

This is all set against the backdrop of the climate crisis, where we aim for people to make a shift from their cars to public transport. That cannot happen if the infrastructure and services are not there for them to make that choice in the first place. We must look at other parts of the UK where things are working well, like the Bee Network in Manchester. Let us work together and use best practice to ensure that the whole UK can remain connected in an affordable and flexible way.

2.58 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Lewell-Buck. I congratulate the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on obtaining time for this timely and important debate. I was particularly impressed by the way he brought together so many people across the party divides with his comments on Edinburgh.

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

The hon. Gentleman spoke about road and rail services; he will forgive me if I take a different focus. Anybody leaving Orkney on the 6.30 am ferry would be lucky to get to London much before quarter to 10 at night. Anybody driving along the still un-dualled A9 from Inverness to Perth would be lucky to arrive much before 8.30 pm. For us, the most important links between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom, and indeed the rest of the world, are airlinks. The codeshare operated between Loganair and British Airways is enormously important for business travel and the visitor economy.

Tourists come to Orkney and Shetland from across the world. Curiously, few of them seem to have heard of Loganair, but they have all heard of British Airways, so when they go on the British Airways website to book a ticket that will take them from anywhere in the world to Heathrow and on through Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen or Inverness into Orkney and Shetland, that is enormously important for us. That code share works better sometimes than others, but it is always a very important service.

The reliance on Heathrow, however, can be something of a mixed blessing for air passengers going from anywhere in Scotland to the rest of the United Kingdom and onward. Heathrow is a massively busy airport—a plane lands there every 45 seconds—so it does not take an awful lot, whether that be weather, some technological breakdown or whatever unforeseen event, for disruption to happen. When it happens, the consequences are always felt most acutely by the short-haul domestic services—in Britain, that is now in effect Scotland, because few short-haul services go through Heathrow to anywhere else in the world.

That situation causes constant anxiety and irritation among passengers going from Scotland to elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The feeling is always that we are harder done by than everyone else. I can understand how that happens, but my recent discussions with British Airways have given me some insight into it. Arrangements in place between the airlines using Heathrow should spread the pain, so to speak, but in essence, because British Airways is such a dominant performer in Heathrow, the other airlines are frankly able to ignore the agreements that are in place. As a consequence, British Airways services—those coming from Scotland, in particular—are left to bear the brunt.

British Airways is therefore the one that gets the criticism, but is not necessarily the one at fault. It tells me that this is something that the Civil Aviation Authority, Heathrow airport, the airlines operating at Heathrow and the Department for Transport could fix between them. My ask of the Minister when she sums up is to make it clear whether she will act as the interlocutor, the spokesperson for Scotland's air passengers in dealing with those bodies—in particular the Department for Transport—to ensure that we are not always the ones who are left behind.

3.2 pm

Gregor Poynton (Livingston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Lewell-Buck. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on securing this important debate.

Connectivity across these islands is vital for our economic growth and prosperity. We are an island nation, and our economy is export and service-led. Those facts reinforce the vital economic importance of excellent connectivity within Scotland, with the wider UK, and beyond. Of course technology and the covid pandemic have changed some working patterns and made online and virtual business interaction commonplace, but a recent WPI Economics report made it clear that businesses continue to rely on good physical connectivity to cement relationships, to enter new markets, to conduct supply chain due diligence and to share knowledge. That is why it is so disappointing that the record of the SNP Scottish Government on transport—both intra-Scotland connectivity and connectivity with the rest of the UK and beyond—is so poor.

To take rail to begin with, the latest Network Rail report shows that 70 million passenger journeys are made annually on Scotland's railways. Of those trips, a total of 9.2 million were made to and from England and Wales. However, what waits for travellers from the rest of the UK when they arrive in Scotland? Unfortunately, they are frequently greeted with a shambolic and declining transport system. Nationalising ScotRail should have been the opportunity to put passengers first. Many of my Livingston constituents use the train every day to get to and from Edinburgh for work, and they require a reliable and affordable service. However, in August, the SNP scrapped a pilot that had removed peak rail fares, despite the scheme increasing rail journeys by 6.8%. It was an SNP Scottish Government policy that had worked, but then they scrapped it.

At last month's Budget in Holyrood, the SNP committed to reducing spending on rail services by £80 million, a profoundly regressive move. Also last month, it confirmed that it is delaying the target date to decarbonise rail from 2035 to 2045, confirming that Scotland's long-suffering rail passengers will have to wait an extra decade for the modern rail services that they were promised. An affordable, reliable rail service can unlock huge environmental and economic benefits, but Scots are again paying the price for the SNP's financial and transport mismanagement.

Another area I want to turn to is aviation. As our island is an export and service-based economy, aviation links are vital. The UK has huge built-in advantages as a services exporter on a global scale and a location where key economic sectors benefit from international connections. However, the record of the Scottish Government here is very unsatisfactory. Our airports continue to struggle against the indifference, and perhaps even hostility, of this SNP Government. Glasgow airport, which once connected Scotland with North America, has no link, and apparently there is no desire, drive or ideas from the Scottish Government to assist in bringing that back.

Of course, there are understandable and justifiable concerns about the impact of aviation on climate change. The answer, however, is not to neglect our aviation sector but to engage enthusiastically with it to improve technology, to invest in sustainable aviation and to help the modernisation of airspace. Sustainable aviation has huge possible economic and environmental benefits, not least to Grangemouth and the wider economy of Scotland. I am delighted to see that the UK Labour Government have at least recognised the potential of sustainable aviation fuel as a source of clean energy and

green jobs in Scotland, as well as across the UK, and have pledged to promote it—if only the Scottish Government had the same foresight, energy and ambition. As we have heard today, on rail, on buses, on roads and in the air, the SNP Scottish Government continue to let down the Livingston constituency and Scotland as well.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (in the Chair): Order. To ensure that all hon. Members get in and we have the Front-Bench contributions, we are going to need to impose a three-minute time limit.

3.6 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mrs Lewell-Buck. I wish you all the best in your new role as Chair in your first Westminster Hall debate—I am sure there will be plenty more of them. I thank the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for setting the scene. I wish the new Minister well in her role. Equally, I wish the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), well in the role that he plays, just to keep the record okay—he always reminds me of these things.

First, I want to give a bit of history. Scotland and Northern Ireland were once joined by a path hewn by giants, or so the legend says, and giants we remain—giants of industry and giants of culture, and we have the ability and the facility to do even better and to be more. I have always said that this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is always better together, and today we will prove that to be the case. I fully support the efforts for the A75 and the A77, but I want to focus on the ferry links, because they are vital. The ferry links are an issue: from the beginning of December, the operators have highlighted difficulties during these winter storms, beginning with Storm Bert, and the effect they have had upon the business, trade and tourism links between Scotland and Northern Ireland. Those links are an intricate part of the UK that are ferry dependent and we need to secure them.

Stena Line was in contact with me regarding issues that must be addressed to continue an operational and effective transport route within the UK. A mechanical issue with the Superfast VII ferry on the Belfast-Cairnryan route during Storm Bert emphasised the critical need for flexibility in managing workforce and operational changes within the ferry sector. Had that happened in the Black Friday or pre-Christmas period, there would have been absolute chaos.

That underscores the necessity of solutions such as the ferry worker concession, and I ask the Minister specifically to ensure that operators such as Stena Line can swiftly deploy vessels and staff to maintain resilience and continuity in the face of inevitable future disruptions. For example, during previous staffing challenges faced by P&O, Stena Line was able to deploy the Nordica on the Belfast-Cairnryan route. Formalising a process between the Government and the ferry operators to enable similar measures in future emergencies would be highly beneficial.

The ferry routes across the Irish sea are a natural, vital national infrastructure that ensure trade, tourism and essential services flow. If the routes were not able to operate in the future because we did not have some of the necessary qualified seafarers, it would mean empty

shelves and would affect the economy, including the delivery of medical supplies, and I believe that my Scottish brethren and sisters would not wish to see that happen.

Scotland is a vital cog in the operation of the UK machine and we must ensure that it is affordably and reliably accessible. That can be done only with infrastructure and investment in the ports by land and sea, and I encourage the Government to foster that connectivity and to put the funding in place. We are stronger together and achieve more together, and the Northern Ireland-Scotland link is a vital part of that strength.

3.9 pm

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Lewell-Buck. I congratulate the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on securing this important debate on an issue that goes to the heart of the economic and environmental goals of the Government.

I represent Edinburgh city centre and have Waverley station at the heart of my constituency, so I will focus on the railway links between Edinburgh and the rest of the UK, because Waverley is our gateway to the rest of the UK. Are hon. Members aware that Waverley is the only railway station in the world named after a novel? I am sure that the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk will find that very metropolitan, but we like it.

Edinburgh is the economic powerhouse of Scotland and I would argue that it is central to our economic development. We have world-class universities, globally significant biotech and informatics, the energy transition on our doorstep, a legal and financial sector, and of course the cultural sector—all brilliant and economically critical, but none incubated in Edinburgh alone; all dependent on our transport and infrastructure links with the rest of Scotland and the rest of the UK, especially London.

We do all those things through Waverley. It has 21 million entries and exits a year, and there are 60 trains a day to London. We receive 1.9 million overnight visits to Edinburgh from outside Scotland. Yes, that includes tourism, but—critically—it also includes business visits. The transport infrastructure is critical to our city's labour market.

I will give two more data points. Since the pandemic, for the first time, more journeys between Edinburgh and London were made by rail than by anything else—57% of the total. Similarly, the percentage of people working from home has increased from 12% before the pandemic to 30% now.

May I ask whether the House is familiar with the concept of WILLIEs? That is not unparliamentary language, but a new acronym in Edinburgh for “Work in London, live in Edinburgh”. We are seeing that with new capacities to work from home, with new rail travel, and it is of benefit to both cities. It contributes to economic dynamism; for couples with two professional careers, it allows both to thrive; it gives employers access to a bigger labour market and it relies on effective national infrastructure. I ask the Minister to recognise the importance of that change.

Finally, I want to draw attention to the development of the new Lumo service. Lumo has expanded capacity as an open access operator, accessing tracks through the regulator. However, I note that the Transport Secretary

[Chris Murray]

is reviewing the role of the regulator in managing open access. Will the Minister commit to the Scotland Office's liaising with the Department for Transport to ensure that we take account of the developments on the London-Edinburgh line?

3.12 pm

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Lewell-Buck. I congratulate the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on securing this important debate.

As the SNP's transport spokesperson in Westminster, cross-border connectivity issues are high on my agenda. A lot has been said about the strategic trunk roads—the A74(M), the A1, the various border routes, the A68, the A7 and suchlike—and about the vital investment that our road network requires. Colleagues in the Scottish Government are very much aware of the pressures on the core roads network, and of the work required to maintain and upgrade it.

The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk referred to the Scottish Government's alleged failure to invest in trunk roads. It is a statement of fact that the capital provided to the Scottish Government was among the worst settlements ever made under the previous Government, which was of course a Government of his party.

Dr Arthur: The hon. Gentleman speaks with some knowledge on this subject, but he will know that the Scottish Government have wasted hundreds of millions of pounds on ferries, about which there are major questions. Would he rather that money had been spent on the trunk roads he referred to?

Graham Leadbitter: I accept the point about ferries, and I would rather they had arrived on time and that the overspend did not exist, but we can compare that with High Speed 2, which is billions of pounds overspent, and the benefit to Scotland has diminished to near zero. There are other examples, including the Scottish Parliament building in Edinburgh, which was signed off by a Labour Government and was massively overspent. It was not the MSPs who supervised or had oversight of that, so there are examples from across all parties of issues with infrastructure projects. The important thing is obviously to learn from them and stop them happening again, which I fully support.

Looking to the south-west of Scotland, I stayed in Galloway for a couple of years and I know very well what the A75 is like. It is a vital link to Northern Ireland, through the port of Cairnryan, and there is ongoing work there. I welcome the cross-party work on that and hope it can continue, with design improvements to the road. I very much support that, and I know that colleagues in the Scottish Government do as well.

There has been a lot of work and discussion between the Scottish Government and the UK Government on rail issues. I very much welcome the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Act 2024, which we fully support. Rail was already in public ownership in Scotland but, in fairness, that legislation has enabled us to ensure that that will continue—public ownership was the operator of last resort, so there was no surety about that, but

now there is. There is a lot of mutual interest in getting this right, so will the Minister give an assurance that there will be strong engagement with the Scottish Government as the legislation develops? I hope that much of that can be addressed prior to publication.

Finally, it is vital that we retain the protected slots at the key hub airports, which are critical to our onward connections to the rest of the world. Also, to pre-empt a question of mine that has been selected for tomorrow, and to use this opportunity to give a bit more context, EGNOS, the European geostationary navigation overlay system, is very technical—

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (in the Chair): Order.

3.17 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Congratulations on your appointment, Mrs Lewell-Buck. I am sure you will do the job with elegance for many years to come.

It has already been said, has it not? My right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) made the point that some of us have to use roads to get to airports to fly here. He mentioned the disgrace of the A9. I was in Holyrood when Alex Salmond promised the dualling of the A9, and when he promised the dualling of the A96. The response to that one is hollow laughter—there are still traffic lights at the railway bridge at Oyne. These people are simply not competent to run the transport of Scotland.

But here is the point: just like my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland does, we need flights to make up for the lack of proper transport on the ground. Right now, we have one flight in and out of Wick airport, run by Eastern Airways—which is better than none, I admit, but we had to fight to get the public service obligation for that. If we are to ensure the economic regeneration of the far north of Caithness, as Dounreay, which was the dynamo of the economy of the farms, runs down and is decommissioned, we will have to encourage other industries to come in. I am sure the Government will do laudable work on that front, but if we do not have the flights in and out of Wick airport, it will not help very much.

Although the Aberdeen flight to Wick is welcome, we need flights to Edinburgh and Bristol and to wherever we can get them. That will make all the difference, so I conclude with a simple plea: please can we get more flights in and out of Wick airport? We need them desperately.

3.19 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mrs Lewell-Buck.

I want to focus my remarks on the A75. As has already been alluded to, it is a vital artery for Northern Ireland, because through it and from it pass most of our incoming and outgoing goods. It is a road on which the HGV traffic is so heavy that, for many, it is a torture to drive its 95 miles. The last figures I saw indicated that, surprisingly, 20% of all vehicles on the A75 are HGVs. Considering that only 1.3% of all registered vehicles are HGVs, that demonstrates just how oversubscribed the A75 is and therefore how inadequate its infrastructure is for that sort of traffic. We have had promises of

upgrades for years, and some upgrades have happened, but there are key pinch points at Crocketford and Springholm that are in desperate need of improvement.

Things have even got worse in the last month because, with the closure of the Holyhead ferry terminal, the increase in traffic volume on the A75 is phenomenal. It is costing business by reason of the delays. It is also costing lives, as the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) said, which is a more important issue. It is many years since I heard promises from Alex Salmond and others about the dualling of the A75. It needs to be delivered.

I support the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway in pressing the Government on the answer on the Union connectivity review promise of money—I think the initial tranche was £8 million—to pursue some of these issues. Is that £8 million still available? Has it been reduced? Has it been increased because of the cancellation of HS2? Where is it? The fundamental question is not what will be promised, but what will be delivered. We have waited far too long. I ask this new Government to show that they are a United Kingdom Government by addressing this road, which is a key link: it links one part of this United Kingdom to the rest, and onwards. Let us get the A75 sorted out at last, please.

3.21 pm

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): It is a real privilege to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mrs Lewell-Buck. I will keep it brief because we are constrained by time.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) because he made so many of the points that are relevant to the A75. The A75 is a complete and utter failure by the SNP. In 2001, the SNP declared that it was the most important strategic road in Scotland. In the more than 20 years since then, virtually nothing other than essential improvements for road safety have taken place. In 2016, Humza Yousaf and John Swinney came to Dumfries for a transport summit to tell us how much they were going to do and what was going to happen. A few weeks ago, John Swinney came back after eight years of nothing happening to tell us that he was now hearing that people were concerned about it.

Let us, on a united basis, I hope, including even our SNP colleagues, send a clear message to John Swinney that we must get on with upgrading the A75 for the people of Dumfries and Galloway, for my constituents and for people who have to drive between, for example, Collin and Carrutherstown on what is virtually a cart track—people would not recognise it as a trunk road or an A road. The UK Government have a key role because the A75 is a strategic route, as has been identified, and we need to hear what they intend to do about the UK connectivity fund.

On rail, I was a strong advocate in the previous Parliament of TransPennine being stripped of its franchise, because the service it provided through Lockerbie from Glasgow and from Edinburgh was totally and utterly inadequate. If I had been the UK Transport Secretary, I would have taken off Avanti as well, because the service it has provided is not good enough. But the problem at the heart of that issue, which I hope the Minister will address, is the issue between the Department for Transport

and the Scottish Government and who is ultimately responsible for issues that affect cross-border services. That needs to be sorted.

Finally, my constituent Denis Male, an 80-year-old councillor for Langholm, would not forgive me if I did not say to my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), who has been such a strong advocate for the Borders rail link—I congratulate him on securing this debate—that the link should go through Langholm. Denis has argued that case for many years and would not want me to miss this opportunity to make that point.

3.24 pm

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): If only we had a road with the quality of the A75—I dream of such a road.

The A82 going up Loch Lomond has to be one of the worst roads in Britain. Lorries and buses cannot pass each other, and that is the main trunk road up to the west. CalMac ferries are a complete disaster story, as we all know. I bet nobody can guess how long it takes to travel the 145 miles from Mallaig to Glasgow. Five hours and 20 minutes, with an average speed of less than 30 miles an hour. High Speed 2? We dream of some of that money. The main road from Inverness to Skye is single-track with lay-bys. It is an absolute scandal in every possible way.

I would like to put forward a motion that Transport Scotland is closed down and that the Scottish Government are not fit to run Transport Scotland.

3.25 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak on your first occasion as Chair, Mrs Lewell-Buck; I hope you have enjoyed it.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for securing this debate. The variation of complaints we have heard shows how serious the issue is, and I sympathise. It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald), because I sympathise: I have spent much of my life travelling up and down the A82, and it has not got better in the five decades that I have been doing it. In fact, it has got worse in so many ways.

I will say it quietly: I represent Edinburgh, and we are lucky because the airport in my constituency of Edinburgh West is the busiest in Scotland. Our railway station, Haymarket, is one of Scotland's busiest, and next door we have Waverley. We have the ability to travel west, north and south in Scotland, and down both coasts—east and west—to London. If only it were so for the rest of Scotland. Elsewhere does not share our easy access, and we desperately need investment.

One of the frustrating things about investment is that the benefits are usually long term and not immediate, but we have only to look at the Borders rail link to see how important and invaluable it can be. Just last month, figures showed that the number of people using the Borders railway increased by more than 30% at some stations between 2023 and 2024. Many of them were coming north, but ultimately they were heading south. It would be much better for them to be able to go

[Christine Jardine]

directly south to Carlisle, but unfortunately the Government have put on hold the £10 million feasibility study into extending that route because of their capital investment review.

The Borders are not alone. The Government believe that putting a halt on infrastructure projects is part of the answer to dealing with the black hole that they never tire of telling us they inherited, and that they use as an excuse for all manner of things. I think they are being short-sighted. It is clear that our infrastructure needs investment. Our trunk roads are lamentable and our railways are little better. Of all the routes, Avanti's London-Scotland west coast direct route has the highest percentage of trains arriving at their destination between 30 minutes and two hours late. LNER's Scottish routes are also its worst performing, and the TransPennine Express routes between Manchester and Glasgow and Edinburgh had the worst punctuality and most cancellations in the most recent performance period.

The Liberal Democrats want to see a new railway agency—a public body that would help to join up the industry from track to train, put commuters first, hold train companies to account and bring in wholesale reform of the broken fare system for all of the United Kingdom. We should invest in research and development to make the UK the world leader in zero-carbon flights, and ensure that more domestic flights use alternative fuels. That is particularly important for communities across the highlands and islands, where, as pointed out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), air travel is a lifeline for people and businesses—although generally only as far as Edinburgh or Glasgow, and that is not good enough.

Edinburgh airport is a major employer in my constituency and supports millions of pounds of investment into Edinburgh and the rest of Scotland through business, tourism and hospitality. It has made substantial progress in reducing its carbon emissions. It is continuing to work on increasing the use of sustainable aviation fuel, which benefits passengers flying across Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. That is part of the reason I believe that this is a timely debate.

The Union connectivity review showed that there is a desire to travel more within the United Kingdom. Good transport links are a vital part of people's ability to maintain connections with family and friends and to get to work without being incredibly frustrated. By delivering infrastructure that works, we can deliver for so many the opportunity of a better quality of life. Infrastructure underpins almost everything about our day-to-day lives, but when talking about investing in cross-border infrastructure specifically, we need to remember that while it benefits the economy and contributes to reducing the impact of climate change, it also represents something more for all of us: the development and the cementing of our Union.

Every UK Government, particularly this one, have a responsibility to every corner of the United Kingdom. People's worlds might be getting smaller, but it is our job in this place to mitigate that. We know that more is achieved when we work together. Would it not help if we had better and more accessible transport links for all of Scotland to all of the rest of the United Kingdom?

3.31 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Lewell-Buck. I join hon. and right hon. colleagues in congratulating you on your appointment. I hope you have enjoyed your first foray into Scottish politics this afternoon, and I look forward to seeing you back in this Chamber on many an occasion as we continue the various debates. Indeed, this is the second time in two days I have found myself here debating issues pertaining to Scotland, although in my view that is still not enough.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on securing this important debate. Cross-border connectivity is an issue he has championed as an MSP, as a Back-Bench MP and indeed as a Minister in the previous Government, and he continues that laudable work now. I am pleased that so many colleagues from across Scotland and Northern Ireland have come to the Chamber this afternoon to discuss this important issue.

As I said, I and others here, including the Minister, found ourselves in this Chamber yesterday afternoon discussing the impact of the UK Government's Budget on Scotland. To save Members from looking the debate up in *Hansard* or watching it on Parliament Live—I do recommend it; some stellar speeches were delivered—I will give a brief synopsis. For farmers, family firms, oil and gas workers, the Scotch whisky industry and the Scottish economy in general, the Budget was not good, but despite the best efforts of the Labour party and the SNP to undermine confidence, deter investment, stymie ambition and entrepreneurship and punish success, the fact is that across the UK and especially in Scotland, we need growth, investment and new jobs.

For all those things, good connectivity to our biggest market by far—the rest of the UK—is key. It is integral to economic growth and business, but also to leisure, education and even health. Fundamentally, good transport links unlock opportunity across Great Britain and Northern Ireland. That is precisely why the Conservative Government launched the Union connectivity review. Despite the lack of co-operation from the Scottish Government, we made several critical commitments, including, as some have mentioned already, to supporting enhancements to the A75 between Gretna and Stranraer to improve the main artery linking south-west Scotland and Northern Ireland, recognising the vital importance of east-west connectivity within the United Kingdom; to funding for dualling the A1 between Morpeth and Ellingham, a vital road route between England and Scotland; and to funding for Network Rail to look at options for boosting capacity and improving services more broadly between England and Scotland.

In other important areas, we delivered improved transport connectivity, with major projects taking big strides forward. We were delivering long-awaited upgrades to the A1 coastal route between Newcastle and Berwick-upon-Tweed and Edinburgh, reducing congestion for the communities of Ashington, Felton, Alnwick and Amble. However, as has been said time and again today, away from cross-border routes, responsibility for our roads lies with the Scottish Government. Companies and individuals seeking to export fish landed at Peterhead, for example, or on Orkney and Shetland, are reliant on increasingly dangerous roads to get it to the border and then into Europe, as a result of the SNP's failure to deliver on its promises.

It has been almost two decades since we first heard the SNP make promises to improve some of Scotland's most dangerous roads, yet those promises remain undelivered and, frankly, broken. The SNP promised to fully dual the A96—a road close to my heart, connecting Aberdeen and Inverness—the A90 and the A9 between the central belt and Inverness, but not one of them has been. Of course, we now know that the SNP's promise to dual the A96 to Inverness by 2030 has been shelved completely, letting down people across the north-east of Scotland once again—and let us not even begin discussing the Laurencekirk junction in my constituency or, just further north, improvements at Toll of Birness on the road between Aberdeen, Fraserburgh and Peterhead.

While we are rightly talking today about cross-border connectivity, let us not forget those who are reliant on the SNP to ensure they can get their goods and themselves to the border. Air travel, which Members have raised this afternoon, is similarly critical for not just business but remote settlements. We protected socially and economically vital domestic routes through public service obligations, and indeed we reformed how the PSOs operated to include routes that operate to and from different regions of the UK, rather than just into London. However, one route into London we did back was from Dundee: in 2021, we provided up to £2.5 million to fund direct flights between Dundee and London for a further two years, keeping a critical route running and ensuring that people at both ends of the UK could keep connected.

We cut the reduced rate of air passenger duty for domestic flights to just £6.50 and consulted on reform to airport landing slot allocations, including proposals to ringfence some slots for domestic flights, which, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said, is so important. I would be grateful if the Minister could update us on the Government's position on that and whether they intend to issue a response to the consultation on ringfencing those slots for domestic flights.

When it comes to rail, we committed over £1 billion for east coast main line upgrades, including a programme to replace Victorian infrastructure with digital signalling, which provides drivers with continuous real-time information. That was designed to boost train performance and cut delays. It is hard to overstate the importance of the east coast main line. A third of the nation's population, who together produce more than 40% of the UK's GDP, live within 20 minutes of an east coast main line station.

The dreadful decision of this Government to hike air passenger duty will mean that people who do not live within a few hours of London on a main rail line such as the east coast main line—for example, those living and working in and around Aberdeen—will face higher fares and fewer options for travel. It punishes those who live outside the central belt and flies in the face of better connectivity around the United Kingdom, which brings us back to the woeful record of the SNP Government in Holyrood.

I have taken the long train journey from Aberdeen to London on many occasions, and the time it takes to reach Edinburgh is striking. Almost a third of the travel time to London from Aberdeen is taken up just reaching Scotland's capital. The SNP promised yet again in 2016 £200 million to cut journey times between Aberdeen and the central belt by 2026. Almost 10 years on, not

even 10% of that money has been spent. As with roads, people who rely on infrastructure for which the SNP is responsible to get to the border are failed by the Scottish Government.

Jim Shannon: I am sure the hon. Gentleman plans to mention ferries, but if not, perhaps he could.

Andrew Bowie: Of course, ferries are increasingly important. I did not want to embarrass the hon. Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter) by dwelling too much on ferries, because that is something on which the Scottish Government have such an embarrassing record. The ferry links between our islands and the mainland—be they the links with Orkney and Shetland, the Western Isles or across to Northern Ireland—are vital to the economic success of our country, linking communities and providing essential routes for health, leisure and tourism and to export the goods that are produced in those communities.

The way that those communities, especially in the Western Isles, have been let down by SNP ineptitude to deliver new ferries on those routes has been embarrassing. The sight of windows being painted on the side of a ferry just so that it can be launched in a PR stunt by the former First Minister will go down in history as one of the most embarrassing moments for the Scottish Government in recent times. Frankly, they owe an apology to those communities who have been so let down by their failure to invest properly in the future. It is not only the Western Isles; other communities rely on ferry connectivity, and it is essential that they get the funding they deserve.

We do not only have questions to ask of the Scottish Government, whose record on transport is dismal. We also have questions for the UK Labour Government about their own record, the decisions that have been taken and their future plans.

Graham Leadbitter: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Bowie: I would be delighted to give way to my SNP friend.

Graham Leadbitter: I just wanted to ask the hon. Gentleman to put on the record that he was part of the Government for a significant period of the past 14 years of austerity, during which there were significant reductions in overall capital expenditure. Does he think that helped or hindered investment in strategic capital transport projects?

Andrew Bowie: I think what most hindered investment in strategic transport projects was the ineptitude of the Scottish Government. Colleagues and I have already gone through the SNP's litany of broken promises to communities across Scotland, be that on the A96, the A9, the A90, the work on the A75, the new ferries to the Western Isles or the protection of air routes across Scotland. It is quite rich for a Scottish National party Member to talk about under-investment in transport when his party's own record is so woeful in that regard; it might be one of the reasons that he and his colleagues number only nine Members of Parliament, compared with the large number that the SNP had in the previous Parliament.

Let me move on from talking about the SNP and focus on the UK Labour Government, because we also have plans for them.

John Grady: As my dear friends tussle, I want to make a minor point. The Conservative Government were in power for 14 years until July, and the SNP Government have been in power in Holyrood for about 18 years. It is quite remarkable for the hon. Member to criticise a Government who have been in power for just six months and have been clearing up a mess left by the Tories. Might I gently ask him to bear in mind those different periods as he proceeds?

Andrew Bowie: I had not got around to criticising the Labour Government—if hon. Members give me time, I will get there—but I gently point out that this concocted mess that the Labour party likes to trot out is as nothing compared with the economic situation that we had to deal with when we came into government, in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, in 2010, which led to so many of the tough decisions that we took between 2010 and 2015. It is as a direct result of decisions taken in the recent Budget that we have seen growth falling, confidence slipping, investment drying up and, today, gilt yields rising to their highest level in more than 20 years. That is on the Labour party's watch and has nothing to do with the Conservatives. We left it with the highest growth in the G7, inflation down to 2% and investment at record levels. I am proud of our record in government. I very much hope that the hon. Gentleman will be able to stand there at the end of his time on the governing party's Benches and say just the same.

As I said, we have questions for the UK Labour Government. We are yet to see a convincing reason for the cancellation of the last Government's plans to dual the A1 between Morpeth and Ellingham, so will the Minister lay out the reasons? There are also questions about what rail nationalisation will mean for the upgrade projects currently under way, which would benefit Union-wide connectivity. Should we expect fare rises, like we have seen with ScotRail, for services to England after rail is nationalised by Labour? On the Borders railway, as my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk asked, could the Minister update us on where we are with the Tweedbank to Carlisle corridor? Why was the feasibility study abandoned? On air passenger duty, what do the Government say to those people living in Scotland, further away from the border, who rely on air links to get to cities south of the border for business and leisure?

On transport more broadly, the Government's record so far gives us cause for concern, and makes us sceptical that Union connectivity is a priority for Ministers or is likely to improve over this Parliament. The Prime Minister himself said that Labour-run Wales should be "a blueprint" for what a UK Labour Government could achieve. That is terrifying. We all know what that really means; we have seen the imposition of blanket 20 mph speed limits and the cancellation of major road building projects, and Labour has cast doubt on its plans to electrify the north Wales main line. So what does Labour-run Wales mean for the rest of the United Kingdom?

Dr Arthur: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, particularly as I think he was reaching some kind of crescendo. He mentioned the 20 mph limits in Wales. Does he welcome the reduction in accidents that that scheme has resulted in?

Andrew Bowie: Of course we would welcome a reduction in accidents, but I have yet to see any evidence that that is a direct result of blanket 20 mph limits. Actually, by the way, I do not think the Labour party in Wales is still in favour of those; I believe that the new First Minister abandoned the blanket 20 mph policy. It is certainly something that would be greatly worrying were it rolled out across Scotland.

Good connectivity and good transport connections are essential. The responsibility for connecting communities and creating opportunities within Scotland lies with the SNP. Our internal market is vital to the economic success of Scotland and the wider United Kingdom. Connections from Scotland to England, and indeed across Great Britain and Northern Ireland, are integral to making the economic progress that we need, and that is the responsibility of the British Labour Government. Now is the time for action, not words. Scotland's economy and communities desperately need that.

3.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Lewell-Buck, and I welcome you to your place. I congratulate the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), my predecessor as Scotland Office Minister, on securing the debate.

I begin where the hon. Gentleman began, and commend him for his tireless commitment to his constituents, including his work on the Borderlands inclusive growth deal. I am sure he will have been pleased that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor confirmed at the Budget that funding will be provided to continue all city and growth deals in Scotland, including the Borderlands inclusive growth deal. We have also approved the final two growth deals, including one that has expanded to ensure that all 12 areas of Scotland can benefit. Indeed, I am delighted to say that it is because of the decisions this Government have taken that we have been able to confirm our commitment to invest nearly £1.4 billion in important local projects across Scotland over the next 10 years. That is positive news for all Borderlands partners and for the wide range of projects in the growth deal, including £65 million for initiatives in Scotland.

None the less, I know that the hon. Gentleman is anxious about another matter. Despite these ambitious commitments, I am cognisant of the uncertainty that remains around the future of the Borders railway feasibility study. We have been clear about the challenging financial circumstances we have inherited and the need to plan differently for infrastructure. Although the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) may be tired of hearing this, that is the unfortunate reality that we have to continue to address by taking difficult decisions to fix the foundations of our economy. My ministerial colleagues at the Department for Transport are continuing to consider the proposals developed as part of the deal and hope to be able to communicate their decision on the UK Government's commitment to the project shortly.

The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk and other Members asked about the dualling of the A1, and I was asked to explain the Government's decision. The answer behind that decision is very simple:

the previous UK Administration made an unfunded and unaffordable commitment to dual the A1 between Morpeth and Ellingham, and as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has made clear, if we cannot afford it, we cannot do it. The decision is simple: it is because of the unfunded nature of the commitment.

My hon. Friends the Members for Livingston (Gregor Poynton), for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) and for Glasgow East (John Grady) have all made eloquent advocacy on behalf of rail passengers who are subject to poor rail performance. I want to reassure them that the Department for Transport will continue to hold all operators to account for their performance through a range of measures, including key performance indicators. The Government simply will not tolerate poor performance and will continue to hold operators to account, regardless of ownership.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) asked whether I will champion Scotland's air passengers, and I will do so. The Scotland Office stands ready to advance the interests of all Scotland's communities.

Chris Murray: I absolutely recognise the importance of air travel to more rural parts of the country, but it is a fact that a journey between Edinburgh and London by electric train, such as those operated by Lumo, produces 95% less carbon emissions than the equivalent flight. Other countries take decisions to disincentivise domestic air travel where rail routes are available. Does the Minister recognise the imperative of the climate emergency, which we must bring to bear when we are talking about whether the Government should incentivise rail travel over flights?

Kirsty McNeill: Very much so, and the integrated transport strategy, which I will come to shortly, is indeed designed to ensure that we are delivering growth, delivering on our climate ambitions and delivering for communities facing a cost of living emergency.

The hon. Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter) took the inexplicable decision to put himself up as the spokesperson for the Scottish Government on transport. His account of the ferries amounted to, "Yes, it would have been better, were it not a complete shambles"—I am sure we can all agree on that. Indeed, it would have been, but the facts are these: the Ferguson ferry saga has continued, with repeated delays to the Glen Sannox and warnings that the Glen Rosa may not be delivered now until late 2025. Let us never tire of saying that the total cost of the two ferries is expected to be nearly £400 million. They will be delivered seven years late and at four times the original budget. Of course, that is not the only place where the SNP is failing so badly. Under the SNP's Government, Scotland's bus network has been dismantled route by route, day by day. Fares have risen, passenger numbers have plummeted and the number of bus routes went down by 44% between 2006-07 and 2023-24—a loss of nearly 1,400 routes for our communities.

We should be clear that wider questions of transport are devolved, and responsibility for transport matters sits largely with that Scottish Government. Despite the Scottish Government's failures, the UK Government are committed to resetting our relationship with them

when we are able to do so, to deliver for the people of Scotland. We have already made significant progress to that end, and in that context I recognise the role Transport Scotland plays in keeping Scotland connected with the rest of the United Kingdom. As an Executive agency of the Scottish Government, the UK Government naturally recognise its independence, but we none the less stand ready to support its delivery for the people of Scotland, where appropriate. The UK Government respect the devolution settlement and are firmly committed to working with the Scottish Government to deliver shared transport priorities and ensure that the economic benefits of improved connectivity are shared across the UK.

The UK Government are also committed to our growth mission to improve the prosperity of the country and the living standards of working people. That is why the Chancellor has pledged to drive sustainable economic growth, and a strong transport network serving communities across the UK will be key to that.

David Mundell: I welcome much of what the Minister has said—that of a non-political nature, anyway—but can she tell us the Government's approach to the Union connectivity review, which was focused on ensuring that we have a network across the United Kingdom and on bringing it together?

Kirsty McNeill: I am delighted to do so, and the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), asked me about that too. We are delivering on the recommendations made by the Union connectivity review, which was conducted by my noble Friend Lord Hendy. The review highlighted the need for strategic transport connectivity improvements across the UK and made recommendations to support improved connectivity to, from and via Scotland.

I have been asked by a number of hon. Members, including the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper), who spoke very movingly about accidents on the A75, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister), for an update on our plans on the A75 and connectivity to Northern Ireland, and I am delighted to provide it. The Hendy review recommended upgrading the key A75 link to improve freight and passenger connectivity with Northern Ireland, so I am pleased to say that the Chancellor has confirmed funding for this financial year and for next for Transport Scotland to continue development work on upgrading the A75. Transport Scotland has completed initial work to scope out possible options for the realignment of the A75 around the settlements of Springholm and Crocketford.

Jim Shannon: I asked some specific questions, so apologies for reiterating this—it is to do with Stena Line, ferries, food, medicine, deliveries, continuity and connection. We do not have roads, and we cannot drive across the Irish sea—unless we find a new James Bond car—so we depend on ferries to get our goods across. I am sorry to ask again, but if the Minister does not mind, I really need that answer. If she cannot give it to me now, I am happy for it to be sent by letter.

Kirsty McNeill: My understanding is that those ferries are operated commercially, but I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman and colleagues from the Department for Transport.

Jim Shannon: It is important infrastructure and needs an upgrade.

Kirsty McNeill: As I said, I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman and colleagues from the Department for Transport to follow up on that. Furthermore, I am pleased to say that the Scottish Government have confirmed their commitment to the feasibility study on the A75 changes to progress that work. That is our reset in action.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bathgate and Linlithgow (Kirsteen Sullivan) helpfully anchored this debate to what it is all about. Of course, it is about growth and the maintenance of the Union, but transport is also fundamentally about people. It is about women, disabled people, and families living with the cost of living emergency. That is why, when families are so up against it, it remains inexplicable that it is cheaper under the SNP Government to fly from Edinburgh to London than it is to go from Edinburgh to Glasgow on a ScotRail peak fare.

That is why this Government have already fulfilled one of our key manifesto commitments and passed the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Act 2024 to bring railways back into public ownership—we are committed to functioning railways. The Act will stop the taxpayer footing the bill for more than £100 million each year in fees to private operators, which provides no benefit whatsoever to passengers or to the taxpayer. It will also ensure that ScotRail is kept in public hands permanently, pave the way for the creation of Great British Railways and end the fragmentation of the franchising system, which will improve our railway network and strengthen connectivity to and from Scotland, including via the vital west coast and east coast main lines.

The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine asked a number of questions on air passenger duty, which I am delighted to answer. As he will know, we are trying to support a fairer and sustainable tax system, and taxation on the aviation sector must be put on a sustainable footing. That is why we are consulting on a proposal to extend the scope of the higher rate of air passenger duty to all private jets, including business jets. That is driven primarily by the Government's commitment to ensuring that operators of and passengers on such jets contribute fairly to the public finances. As he will well know, air passenger duty rates have fallen behind inflation, and private jets are relatively undertaxed, so in 2026-27 the Government will adjust all air passenger duty rates to help to correct for below-inflation uprating in recent years.

Because this Government are committed to supporting working people, we have frozen fuel duty and extended the temporary 5p cut for one year. That will benefit an estimated 3.2 million people in Scotland, supporting hard-working families and businesses and saving the average car driver £59 in 2025-26. I am sure I do not need to remind colleagues that the cost of living remains high, so these measures are vital to support working people across the UK.

As I mentioned earlier, none of these decisions can be taken piecemeal: they must form part of a coherent and ambitious plan. That is why this UK Government is mission-led, with long-term objectives that will deliver our plan for change and spread prosperity across the UK.

I once again congratulate the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk on securing the debate and thank all hon. Members for their contributions. I am sure colleagues across the House will agree that it is essential that we continue to do all we can to strengthen our transport network, ensuring that communities in Scotland and across the UK remain connected and play their rightful role at the heart of this Government's ambitious agenda.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (in the Chair): Before I call the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) to wind up, I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for their kind words. It is indeed a pleasure to be in the Chair.

3.56 pm

John Lamont: If I may say so on behalf of all Members, you have done a spectacular job as Chair, Mrs Lewell-Buck. I am grateful to all hon. and right hon. Members for contributing to the debate. We have Members here from across Scotland and also from Ulster, and I am grateful for the important points they made about the connections between their part of the world, Scotland and the rest of the UK. I am also grateful to the Minister for her response, and I look forward to hearing from her further on the Borders railway. On the feasibility study, we have heard about the importance of transport links not just to our respective constituencies, but in linking to all parts of the United Kingdom. They have a strategic and symbolic importance in preserving our Union.

There is a shared frustration among hon. Members across the House—perhaps with the exception of one hon. Member—about the failures of the Scottish Government and the SNP in terms of their responsibility to deliver good transport links for our constituents. There is certainly a shared frustration on the Opposition Benches with some of the decisions that the new UK Labour Government have made in funding projects into Scotland. As we heard earlier, the A1 improvements have been a bit of a disappointment for my constituents and those in North Northumberland, so we hope the UK Government will continue with the commitments made by the previous Government on investment in our transport network in Scotland, despite the devolved responsibilities of the Scottish Government.

I conclude by responding to the hon. Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) and his helpful description of the name of Waverley station. I fully admit to being a daft laddie from the Borders countryside, but I was fully aware of the origins of the name of Waverley station. It was named after the Waverley route, which was the railway line that went from Edinburgh down through the Borders to Carlisle, so I am very familiar with that. Of course, that was named after the novels written by Sir Walter Scott, who is a fine son of the Borders. I think that is a good place to conclude the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered transport links between Scotland and the rest of the UK.

Children and Young People with Cancer

4 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of welfare for children and young people with cancer.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Lewell-Buck, and to discuss an issue that is important to me. As a society we are aware of the cost that cancer has on our lives: it deprives us of a future with our loved ones; it leaves us tormented with constant hospital visits; it forces an anxiety on us about what will happen next; and it causes us relentless emotional, physical and mental pain. It is a pain that does not go away, even when the cancer does.

I regret, however, that society fails to understand the literal costs of having cancer not just to us as individuals but to children, young people and their families. Lest we forget the cruel reality of cancer for young patients, which is often different from that of adults, the cancers that they experience are often faster-growing, less common, have unique emotional and mental health impacts, and have significant long-term treatment effects. The support that they require is therefore quite distinct, and has specific financial implications that make it especially hard.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for all his efforts on cancer issues in the short time that he has been in this place. He has been assiduous, focused and very much to the fore on the issue, and we thank him for that. In relation to the welfare of children and young people with cancer, is he aware that 71% of families impacted by cancer in young people are struggling to meet travel costs? That is the case in Northern Ireland, but I understand that it is also the case on the mainland. With one in 10 people missing appointments because they have not got the finances to go to them—and the impact that has on the NHS—does the hon. Gentleman agree that now is the time for Government to step up and ensure that the finance to travel for young people with cancer is made available?

Clive Jones: The hon. Member is absolutely right that there are huge costs, especially for children when they have to face cancer, and for the parents of children, because they have to take time off work to look after the children. There is not always the necessary support. Research from Young Lives vs Cancer highlights that on average, a cancer diagnosis for children and young people delivers £700 of additional costs every month for a patient and their family. Those additional costs come alongside significantly falling household income, with an average drop of over £6,000 a year; for at least one in three, that drop is over £10,000 a year.

Cancer does not have the decency to allow people to consider the implications of what happens next, but instead forces people to immediately start spending more. For example, it adds £250 extra a month on travel to hospital, £144 extra on food, often due to specialist requirements and extra hygiene caution, and £68 extra on energy to ensure that the home is always warm and clean, due to young cancer patients being immunocompromised. Those examples and many more all take place from day one.

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): I thank the hon. Member for bringing this matter to the House today. Many people will know my own personal story, and that my husband has cancer. One thing we have found on this journey is the number of young people who are currently in hospital beds across Northern Ireland and every other part of the UK. Many of those children, whenever they undergo treatment, will become neutropenic, which involves, as the hon. Member just mentioned, the issue of hygiene, cleanliness, food and everything else. There are numerous charities across Northern Ireland such as Powered by Poppy, inspired by Poppy Ogle who sadly passed away from cancer, and there is Adam's Army, which operates close to my constituency in Lagan Valley. Families go out of their way to provide services because the state will not step up, and that situation cannot continue. Does the hon. Member agree that cancer is the worst thing that can ever come across a family's door? Yet whenever the state does not step in, it makes an awful situation a million times worse.

Clive Jones: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. She is absolutely right: cancer is the worst thing that can ever cross a family's doorstep. It affects every family, every person, very differently. Financially we need something called Hugh's law, which I will talk about later. That could give a family £700 every month from diagnosis. At the moment people have to wait at least three months, then fill in the forms and wait another three or four months. But Hugh's law, for not an awful lot of money, could change all that very quickly. I will come on to that.

I hope I have made it clear that the costs are overwhelming; and yet the existing support from the Government is woefully lacking. I would go as far as to say it is downright cruel. Disability benefits are vital for children and young people with cancer because of the costs associated with diagnosis. They come in the form of personal independence payments, disability living allowance and, subsequently, carer's allowance. Despite those benefits' being so crucial and the effects of cancer being so immediate, children and young people face a three-month qualifying period before they can claim PIP or DLA. I would just like to repeat that: children and young people are subject to a three-month qualifying period, which for most is from the point of diagnosis, before they can access support.

The very purpose of welfare or social security is to deliver support for the most vulnerable. Young cancer patients go through some of the toughest, unimaginable pain—pain that even I, as a cancer survivor, could not contemplate. They do it with perseverance, with diligence, and somehow they do it with hope.

Tragically, some families lose their child to cancer. To be told at the start of that journey through hell that patients and families need to wait three months before applying for vitally needed funds is simply inexplicable. The evidence shows that the costs are immediate, and yet patients and families are deprived of support that they urgently need from day one. Can the Minister please clarify why it is necessary to have a three-month qualifying period? Can he explicitly put it on the record whether he thinks that that is appropriate in the case of children and young people with cancer? Alternatively, could he please publish the advice from civil servants that are insisting on the three-month qualifying period?

[Clive Jones]

The argument has to be made that the impact of a condition needs to be evidenced for three months before DLA or PIP can be provided to avoid benefit fraud, but it is very clearly established that children and young people with cancer will be significantly impacted by their cancer from the start, even before it is diagnosed. Surely a confirmed medical diagnosis is enough. The Minister may claim that someone with cancer might have been impacted by the condition before their diagnosis was given and therefore their qualifying period will have begun prior to diagnosis. However, experts make it clear that until the diagnosis is given, it is almost impossible for children and young people to know that they have a serious condition that qualifies them for benefits and to evidence the impact. The diagnosis is key. That is simply the reality.

In the experience of charities that I have talked to, children and young people who apply for disability benefits are nearly always successful. Very, very few are rejected at the point of initial application or subsequent appeal. However, I recognise that it may be concluded that that is anecdotal. Therefore it would be incredibly helpful if the Minister could confirm that the majority of children and young people with cancer are successful in their applications for PIP and DLA and that very few, if any, are rejected for benefits. If he could provide the precise statistics, I would be very grateful.

Research also shows that once the three-month qualifying period has concluded, there are significant delays in applications' being processed after they are submitted. This period currently sits at up to 20 weeks. The qualifying period and these additional delays are leaving children and young people without benefits support for several months. For the application processing, the benefits can be backdated, but only to the point of application rather than diagnosis. That leaves people missing out on benefits support for the first three months of their illness. Based on data from Young Lives vs Cancer, it concludes that children and young people with cancer and their families will have incurred additional costs of on average £2,100 before they can even apply for any benefit.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for allowing me to speak and for securing this important debate. That issue of up-front costs and the costs to some of these children and their families has been underpinned by research by the organisations that he has mentioned. Just 12% of families say that their costs are covered by the current scheme. As children's cancer therapy gets more specialised, with those families often being forced to travel further and further, there is a big concern about that. It is happening in my constituency, where some families are forced to miss appointments or delay the start of treatment because they cannot afford the costs. Those delayed and missed appointments are actually costing the NHS a lot of money at the moment. While we try to establish new arrangements for travel funding, there are opportunities for savings, by stopping those missed appointments, that could be put back into the pockets of those young children.

Clive Jones: The hon. Member is absolutely right: we could save the NHS a lot of money, because a lot of appointments will be cancelled because people are getting

used to the fact that their child has cancer, and that they have to make alternative arrangements in order to take them to the hospital where they will be treated. If they were able to get a payment straightaway, that would save the NHS money in the long term. The money that it might cost to make those payments could be recouped further down the line, so the hon. Member is absolutely right.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing today's debate. He mentioned the impact of investing early and of people being able to qualify for payments from day one. Does he agree with me and with Teach Cancer a Lesson, a charity set up by one of my Hazel Grove constituents in Mellor, about the impact of ensuring that education continues when children have a cancer diagnosis? Teach Cancer a Lesson talks about making sure that local authorities have a responsibility to review the education provision for a child on day one, or within 28 days of a cancer diagnosis. Does my hon. Friend agree that the same principle applies—that it costs far less in the long term, in educational terms, if that review is done early, rather than waiting and waiting and allowing a child's education to suffer?

Clive Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If a child can try to have a normal life, which includes still going to school, seeing their friends and being educated, that will help them and their family to cope with their treatment. Schools and local authorities should work hard to ensure a normal life for that child very quickly.

One family supported by Young Lives vs Cancer received their first DLA payment only in January, after their child was diagnosed in July. In another case, a delay of four months from the start of a DLA application meant that a young cancer patient's mother was left with no financial support, because her statutory sick pay ended before the DLA started. How the Government expect people to manage with those extra costs is beyond me.

This is the very worst form of bureaucratic inflexibility, and it leads to some people not applying for benefits because they see a system stacked against them, quite apart from the burden of applying during the most disruptive time of their lives. People are not going to prioritise form filling when they or their child needs radiotherapy. The process takes so long that sometimes children and young people have either finished their treatment or, most concerningly, passed away before the benefits have been awarded. A child being treated in Leicester sadly died before a DLA decision was made, leaving their family to go through the challenging conversation of wanting the claim form still to be reviewed because the family were owed a back payment. That is unacceptable.

The Minister responded to a parliamentary question by arguing that those nearing the end of life can apply for special rules. However, this simply does not work very well, because situations can change quickly and some who are not terminally ill can rapidly deteriorate. Some may still receive potentially curative treatment even if the risk of death is high, or some may wish not to know their prognosis. The Minister needs to urgently assess the benefits of changing to a medical evidence-based eligibility for these patients.

There is a precedent for medical evidence being used to expedite access to benefits. The existing special rules process for those with terminal illness definitions means that they do not need to meet the three-month qualifying period with medical evidence. That principle should be applied to all children and young people with cancer, to facilitate immediate access to benefits.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Royal Marsden, which is a world-class facility for treating cancer patients, is in my borough of Sutton. One of the things that struck me when I went there was how much energy goes into trying to make the whole experience for the family and the child going through cancer as comfortable as possible. It was not just about the clinical treatment that that child received, but about having play spaces and comfort areas, and doing everything possible to make that really tough experience a manageable one. Does my hon. Friend agree that the state should seek to do the same, by reducing bureaucratic hurdles, such as those he described, to ensure that that terrible time for the family goes as comfortably as possible?

Clive Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We should be doing everything, especially in the first few weeks, days and months of a diagnosis, to make it as comfortable for a child as possible. Adults who get cancer have a circle of friends around them and can cope with it. I have no idea what it is like for a child, but I can imagine that it is very difficult, so having a play area and things they are familiar with using must make that experience much easier.

I want to ask the Minister if, as per the principles of the existing special rules process, he will consider using medical diagnosis to allow children and young people with cancer to apply for benefits as soon as their diagnosis is confirmed. Does he also recognise that the special rules process in its current form is flawed? One young person treated in London was awarded DLA only a few weeks before they sadly died, despite using the special rules process, which should have expedited their benefits. The stress placed on their family was significant.

I pay tribute to the campaign of Ceri and Frances Menai-Davis to establish Hugh's law, in the name of their six-year-old son, who tragically died from a rare form of cancer. Their story is heartbreaking, but is unfortunately a common reality for parents who are forced into darkness. At one of the lowest moments in their life, with the Government looking away from them, support is a struggle to access, rather than a guarantee. I personally endorse the objectives of Hugh's law: for financial aid to be granted to the parents of chronically sick children from day one and for the removal of the three-month qualifying period, which Young Lives vs Cancer has also called for. Its research is right that, for a very small cost, the Government could transform the lives of thousands by delivering parents a limited-time, non-means-tested benefit to cope as their lives completely change.

I met Ceri on Monday to discuss her campaign, and I attended the Hugh's law event today on the Terrace pavilion. Hearing directly about people's lived experience and from experts at that event reinforced why we urgently need change. Does the Minister support Ceri and Frances's campaign for Hugh's law? If not, will he explain why?

PIP and DLA are not the only benefits to be severely delayed by a system that does not work. Carers can apply for carers' allowance and other associated carer support only once PIP and DLA have been approved for the young cancer patient they are caring for. That means that carers may be caring for many months before they can apply for carers' benefits and get what they are entitled to.

I could continue. There exists a loophole in universal credit whereby young people who are at university when they are diagnosed with cancer and then defer their course, with the aim of restarting it when they finish treatment, are not entitled to student finance because they are not actively attending university. However, they are not entitled to universal credit either because they are still classed as "in education". Students should not be forced to totally drop out and start university from the beginning. To state the obvious, a cancer diagnosis is not their fault, and forcing them to disrupt their lives even further is completely pointless. Will the Minister look at the broader welfare support system in relation to children and young people with cancer, in co-operation with expert charities, to close other loopholes and ensure that the full package of support meets their needs?

There are too many points to raise in just one debate, but I would like to conclude on a slightly more optimistic note, following the confirmation from the Department of Health and Social Care that the children and young people cancer taskforce will be launched this year, and that it will seek to identify ways to improve the experience and outcomes for children and young people with cancer. Although I await the specifics of the relaunch of the taskforce, the principles are of good intention. I know that the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) has been an incredible champion of this project. Will the Minister work with the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that the children and young people cancer taskforce looks at psychosocial support, which is something I could not address in my speech, along with welfare. Will he also make representations to the Health Minister to ensure that this new body links appropriately with the long-term cancer strategy for England?

4.25 pm

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): Like everybody else, I am delighted to find you in the Chair this afternoon, Mrs Lewell-Buck

I welcome this debate, as well as the speech that the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) made and the consistent attention he has paid to this issue since he was elected last year. I also welcome what all the others who have spoken in this debate have said. There is a lot that I would like to say in response, but unfortunately I have only four or five minutes in which to say it. I will have to cut my remarks rather short, so I might need to write to the hon. Gentleman with some of my responses, rather than putting them on the record now. However, I am glad that he has drawn attention to the fact that the Secretary of State has said he is reinstating that taskforce in our 10-year plan for the NHS, within which he has made it clear that he wants a separate cancer plan. It will be very helpful for the children and young people cancer taskforce to focus on identifying ways to include outcomes for this particular group of patients.

[Sir Stephen Timms]

The debate has focused on the contribution of the social security system in supporting families of children and young people with cancer through the disability living allowance for children aged under 16 and the personal independence payment for those who are 16 or above. Those benefits are available if a child or young person's condition or illness is long term and gives rise to care, daily living or mobility needs. The benefits contribute to the extra costs arising as a result of a disability or health condition. I will not claim that the support meets all the costs, as that would be incorrect, but they are a contribution—that is intention behind them.

The assessment for those benefits is based on the needs of the individual rather than on the condition, and many with cancer are eligible. The highest level of benefits can mean an extra £9,500 a year tax-free—the order of magnitude that the hon. Gentleman refers to. The benefit is usually paid to the parent of the child, and so can help with overall family finances, as they see fit. We are currently supporting about 3,000 children under 16 and 2,000 young people between 16 and 24 with cancer, with an average award of around £155 per week.

Clive Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Sir Stephen Timms: I will give way, but I will not have very much time.

Clive Jones: I apologise for leaving the Minister with only a few minutes. I have no idea what he is going to say, but I would like him to make some comment about Hugh's law, and whether or not he supports it, because it would make a huge difference to every single family.

Sir Stephen Timms: I am not able to announce a big change this afternoon along the lines that the hon. Gentleman has suggested, but I do want to comment—and would have done, if I had had a little longer—on the qualifying period. I have met the campaigners with their MP, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Chris Hinchliff). They make a compelling and vivid case about their own experience, as well as the financial and emotional difficulties that they suffered as a result.

The qualifying period is there to distinguish between a short-term and long-term condition. It is not about fraud, as the hon. Member for Wokingham suggested might be the case; it is there to make that distinction, and it is quite an important part of the eligibility process for benefits. I am not able to announce a big change in that. Of course, we will keep these things under review. I have met the campaigners, and we will certainly listen to representations that come forward—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Playgrounds

4.30 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the provision of playgrounds by local authorities.

Thank you for the opportunity to lead this important Westminster Hall debate on the future of playgrounds under your chairship, Mrs Lewell-Buck. Fixing our public services and securing our unity as a country are serious issues to consider and serious goals to pursue. We need to be on the side of working people. We also need to be on the side of playing children: we need to be as serious about the play of children as we are about the work of adults. If anyone listening is in doubt, that is because our country has trivialised play for too long. I am astonished that there has only ever been one national play strategy, which was launched 17 years ago. I am also astonished that this is the first debate on the subject in eight years and—at an hour—the longest for 17 years.

Is it any wonder that people feel pushed out by politics and disaffected by democracy, when playgrounds are so ignored that they have been left to fall to pieces, with large pieces of equipment missing, and largely exclude children with special educational needs and disabilities? Is it any wonder that our playgrounds are rotting, when our Parliament barely discusses them and when the last Government to invest in them—a Labour Government—did so 17 years ago, only for their £235 million programme to be cut three years later by the coalition Government?

Why does it matter so much for this new Labour Government to help children to play? Let me tell hon. Members, in the words of my constituents. I launched a survey before Christmas, once this debate was confirmed; we had sought the debate following a roundtable with local parents. I am pleased to see a constituent who attended that roundtable, Anne-Marie Burr, here today. Anne-Marie helped to launch the Our Spaces BCP Facebook group, which brings parents together to campaign for better play equipment.

My survey has received 642 responses, and I thank everyone who has shared their views. I have read every response and every comment on Facebook and Instagram. It is time to take the Minister on a tour of beautiful Bournemouth and of my constituents' viewpoints.

First, the main thing that parents tell me they want from playgrounds for their children is a place to grow, to experiment, to push themselves, to learn alongside others and to be free from a screen-obsessed childhood. Niamh from Springbourne says it well:

“Creativity is built in these free spaces where kids create their games and realities.”

Niamh's daughter was obsessed with the monkey bars. I can relate. They have built capabilities that Niamh knows only a playground could have built. For Skye in Pokesdown, playgrounds

“give children a safe place to play and explore.”

For Natalie in Southbourne,

“unstructured free play helps children develop in many ways, including their cognitive development”.

Charlotte, also in Southbourne, agrees:

“Playgrounds are essential for child development”.

Playgrounds provide critical space for imaginative play, in the view of Chloe in Springbourne, Susie, Milo and Lillie-May in Southbourne, Louise and Kelly in East Southbourne, Christine, Lucy and Amy in Queen's Park, Angela in Muscliff and Verity in Tuckton. Mark in Littledown talks about the joy that his young children feel when they play and when they develop as they play. He says that

"they love to go to the park. It's a good thing for them to do. It develops them both physically and in terms of engaging with other children".

Thomas in Southbourne sees the same joy in his children's play:

"Good playground equipment helps children to develop physical skills like bounce and grip, but most of all, they are fun!"

My second point is that in a cost of living crisis, playgrounds give families places to spend time at no cost. Joanne in Muscliff is right to say that they provide free activity; that point is echoed by Nicole in Moordown, Louise in Charminster, Laura in Springbourne, Sarah in Iford, Victoria in Muscliff, Victoria in Pokesdown and Candice in Tuckton.

The third point that residents have raised is that playgrounds are vital outdoor spaces for parents and families who do not have space at home. Stephanie in Littledown and Iford says it well:

"For some children they do not have access to outside space at home and therefore playgrounds are vital for the health of this group of children."

Kimberly in Muscliff agrees that playgrounds provide

"a place to go and meet others...lots of children don't have access to a garden or the kind of equipment that is in a playground."

Rachel in Muscliff says it brilliantly:

"We need safe outdoor spaces for our children to be able to enjoy. It also helps with reducing isolation."

When the world of children is constantly shrinking, that is even more important.

My fourth point is that sadly some politicians tell children to get outside more, but it is not fair to criticise them for spending time on their screens, enjoying play in the only way they know how. It is usually the same politicians who have forced them, through policies and funding cuts, to shrink their world to their home or—even worse—to the smartphone in their hand. When playgrounds are being locked up or sold off and when parents lack safe outdoor spaces, where is left for children to go? As Alice in Boscombe says:

"How can we keep our kids away from screens when playgrounds are broken, unattractive, a lot of times unkept and dirty?"

What will the consequence be?

Parents know that few of the social skills that children need as adults will be acquired through the scrolling of bottomless social media feeds. Anyone who has seen a two-year-old master the touch-and-swipe interface of a smartphone knows that we risk more and more children at younger and younger ages spending more and more hours scrolling through bottomless feeds. Parents are concerned. Helen in Southbourne says that

"with the rise of screen time in the younger generation, we as adults must provide exciting, enjoyable and affordable alternatives."

Sian in Springbourne says that we need playgrounds

"so children aren't stuck behind screens all day."

Young brains are being rewired. We want children to be children, because that is a good thing in its own right, but we must keep it in mind that the growing number of children hooked on social media today may become a growing number of patients of mental health services and economically inactive adults, contributing less in tax to the Treasury while increasing demand on already strained publicly funded services. Just as our predecessors in Parliament passed legislation more than a century ago to protect children against work-based childhoods, we can pass a safer phones Bill to make smartphones less addictive for children.

My fifth point is that playgrounds are important places for children with special educational needs and for their carers. Our lack of play spaces shrinks the world of children, but it particularly shrinks it for those with special educational needs and disabilities. Terrie from Springbourne told me:

"After my autistic daughter's school were unable to meet her needs, I ended up home educating her. The local park is a place where she can socialise, get fresh air and exercise. She genuinely looks forward to our daily park time."

Kathryn from Boscombe says:

"Aside from children's physical development, it's also a place children (and parents) can go when mental health takes a dive. As a mum of children with SEN this is essential to our daily routine!"

Terri from Muscliff says:

"There is barely any accessible play equipment in our local area for children with complex needs. If a child uses a wheelchair, there is nothing that they can do in parks."

Hon. Members will be pleased to know that I am coming to my sixth and last point. Playgrounds can also help to end the isolation that parents can feel; it is not just children who benefit. Anna from Southbourne says:

"On lower, more exhausted days I've had some really special moments of connection with parents I don't know in playgrounds while our children play."

For Matthew from Springbourne, playgrounds offer

"a place to meet friends and other parents alike."

Laura, also from Springbourne, says:

"The social and psychological value of play parks as part of the fabric of a healthy community should not be underestimated. As a parent to my young daughter, the park was often the only place I might interact with other adults/parents on a given day, and it was a nexus for exchanging local information and support."

Most heartbreakingly, Mary from Queen's Park says

"Playgrounds can be a lifeline for mothers who are in distress. I have met mothers who are escaping domestic abuse, poor housing, depression, loneliness or just need a change".

In an age of isolation, polarisation and insecurity, society can be reinvigorated in the playgrounds of our country. Democracy is made in the playgrounds and given new life among the monkey bars, swings and slides and between strangers on benches. Parents may have their children as the unifying feature at first, but over time all kinds of conversations bubble up on that bench that would not otherwise have happened. This Parliament can only be as strong as our playgrounds.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making excellent progress; I love the six points that he has given us. I am happy to say that my constituency has a number of historic parks such as Alexandra Park and Platt Fields Park. However, as he points out, a third of British young people have no access to any nearby playgrounds. Surely that is not acceptable. Does he

[Afzal Khan]

agree that we need to increase access to nature and green spaces to give children and young people better and stronger emotional and physical wellbeing?

Tom Hayes: I could not agree more. My hon. Friend is a champion for play in his area. In Bournemouth East, contact with a play area is at 35%, which is a significant problem, and I know that it is worse around the country.

I ask the Minister to help. First, as we have an hour for this debate, I invite him to meet Eugene Minogue of Play England, who is here today, with visiting Bournemouth residents, such as Anne-Marie, and with me to take the matter further.

Secondly, this is unfinished business for Labour. Ed Balls and Andy Burnham—whatever happened to them?—published the first national play strategy for England 17 years ago. Much of the strategy stands up today, but my view and that of important leaders in the sector is that it could be dusted off. The Minister could be the new Andy Burnham. He could be the new Ed Balls: he could help people to “Strictly Keep Playing”. The Minister and the Treasury may be reassured to know that a strategy does not necessarily require significant additional funding. All we need is changes to policy to better spend the money already in the system.

Thirdly—I am eager to discuss this point at greater length—the Government could implement play sufficiency legislation for English children to achieve equality with Welsh and Scottish children. A perfect opportunity to do so exists through the planning and infrastructure Bill; that was in Play England’s general election manifesto. The Government could give playgrounds the same status as sports facilities by extending Sport England’s remit to play areas so that consideration of playgrounds becomes a statutory duty, as with sports facilities. Following this Government’s welcome change to paragraph 104 in chapter 8 of the national planning policy framework, which provides protection for formal play spaces, I would love to work with the Minister to bring that into meaningful practice.

I urge the Government to mandate local authorities to map play facilities and their current state and quality. Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council has done so voluntarily, not because it was mandated. I commend BCP council for agreeing to the Plan for Play strategy—and I am not doing so purely because the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade), is the last leader of the council and will respond to the debate.

I commend local councillors across Bournemouth East, particularly Sharon Carr-Brown, who has been advocating for play areas in her ward of Queen’s Park and Charminster. Indeed, it reflects the advocacy of Sharon and her co-councillor for the ward to be focused on. We will see a £75,000 grant funding bid this week; if successful, that will be flexibly spent in the ward. Some good news for Cyril Gardens is that it is about to see the replacement of a long-broken toddler swing, which just goes to show that when you campaign you can get things done.

In 1999, Tony Blair said:

“If we are in politics for one thing it is to make sure that all children are given the best chance in life.”

In 2024, the Prime Minister said that

“arguably nothing says more about the state of a nation than the wellbeing of its children.”

We have had such consistency over so many decades. Now is the opportunity for this Government to finish the business of the last Labour Government. I want to support this Government as they support Bournemouth children and families to improve their wellbeing. We can do no better than to start with a long-overdue, once-in-a-generation improvement of playgrounds.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members that they should bob if they wish to be called to speak. I will call the first Front Bencher at about 5.10 pm.

4.43 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is an absolute pleasure to speak in this debate; I will restrict myself to the time limit to ensure that others can speak. I commend the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) for taking the opportunity to set the scene so well.

If we ask any councillor in any borough of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland about playground provision, they will say that one of the biggest issues they face—after dog fouling, of course—is not simply securing funding for play parks, but upkeep and the need for better provision of disabled access equipment. It happens all the time. I commend those in my constituency; I used to be a councillor for 26 years before I became an Assembly Member and then came to this place, so I understand where the responsibility lies.

I also understand that community power can sometimes make a difference. My council, Ards and North Down borough council, was going to close the play park in Kircubbin, but community power made the difference. The community campaigned heavily and in the end it won, justifiably.

The council’s play strategy states:

“It is recognised that the ability to play should be available to all regardless of age, gender and ability. The delivery of fixed and non-fixed play provision should ensure that all needs are catered for. As a minimum, 30% of equipment in fixed play areas should be classified as ‘inclusive’”—

so everyone can use it—

“and there should be a reasonable balance of play equipment suitable for younger children 3-6 years and 7-12 years old.”

That is much easier said than done, of course. Although it is great that councils have their own play strategies, the piecemeal approach means a postcode lottery. The point that I put to the Minister, from a Northern Ireland perspective, is that we do not need a postcode lottery; we need strategy, policy and regulation across all council areas.

According to 97% of teachers, outdoor play is critical for children to reach their full potential. I have six grandchildren. The biggest girl is 15 and plays in the local football team. The sport and outdoor activity of my six grandchildren, aged from 15 right down to two, is so important. It boosts social skills and gives children the opportunity to let off steam. Given the recent worrying news that some 70,000 children in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland are

suffering as a result of inadequate mental health support, adventurous, outdoor play is more important than ever. For those with autism, who are educationally challenged, with ADHD, dyslexia or other educational issues, it is really important.

Does the Minister have any plans to deliver funding to councils to enable them to meet their obligations, to ensure that children in every area of the United Kingdom where he has responsibility to have the opportunity to meet other children, learn new skills and push themselves into new experiences, and to mention this in the discussions that he has regularly with his Northern Ireland counterparts? I believe that is imperative and that we must prioritise it.

I want to make one quick point. All Christmases are special, but this one was even better for my wife and I. My younger son, his wife, their four-year-old and two-year-old are staying with us, and the wee two-year-old boy smiles all the time. There would not a day when he smiles at me—even when I may not feel like smiling—that it fails to give me a lift. The laughter of children is priceless but there is a price to be paid to achieve it, and we must be prepared to stand over it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (in the Chair): Order. I must now impose a four-minute limit. I call Leigh Ingham.

4.47 pm

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) for securing this debate on an important issue. Every child deserves the opportunity to play, not only for their health but to foster a sense of connection within their local community. That includes children with special educational needs and disabilities. Ensuring that our playgrounds are sufficient and inclusive is not simply a matter of infrastructure; it is a matter of fairness and compassion.

I am concerned that there are not enough accessible parks, and that those that are accessible are not similarly so for neurodiverse children. To truly cater for SEND children, both with physical disabilities and neurodiversity, playground design must go beyond a sticking-plaster approach. We need well thought out, fit-for-purpose equipment that prioritises sensory play and safety. That includes sensory equipment items that are both functional and inviting, and spaces that are designed to reduce overstimulation.

In my constituency of Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages, I have been working with some SEND campaigners, who are parents themselves: Becky, Shannon and Jess. I pay tribute to their hard work. They are particularly concerned for the safety of neurodiverse children in playgrounds. When a neurodiverse child is overstimulated, they sometimes want to run, and parents are finding themselves having to resort to harnesses to keep their children safe. The campaigners believe that high, sturdy metal fences, much like those in Victoria Park in my constituency, are essential for children who sometimes run. They are similar to those seen around old Victorian parks in many of our constituencies. These fences provide security for parents and carers, reducing the need for uncomfortable measures like harnesses.

The emotional toll of exclusion is profound. Parents of neurodiverse children often describe feeling ostracised when playgrounds fail to accommodate their children's needs. Without adequate sensory equipment or secure calming spaces, neurodiverse children may struggle to engage, leading to further isolation for the child and the family. Parents have told me that they have received comments and judgments from friends and family for using harnesses with their children. Alongside parents in my constituency, I have recently engaged with Newlife, a charity for disabled children. It provides equipment and resources to parents of children with disabilities, and its people told me about the exhaustion of parents who turn to them with their experiences.

Playgrounds are not just play areas for exercise and fun but social hubs for children and parents. Many parents love that moment to sit, have a chat with other parents and let their children have fun. Caring for a child with special needs can already be exhausting and isolating, and it is not just children with special educational needs and disabilities who deserve community; it is their parents as well. More accessible playgrounds would open the world up to these families, and it is imperative that we give them access to that opportunity.

4.50 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Lewell-Buck. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) on securing this important debate. This issue matters personally to me as a mother of three children—two boys and a girl. I have watched each of them grow through unstructured play. Indeed, we chose to live near a park because I recognise the importance of parks and outdoor play. I want to ensure that every child across the country, and future generations of children, have the same opportunities to play as my children have had. As the former chair of a charity that ran the local recreation ground, I know the importance of spaces like playgrounds as hubs for the community.

As policymakers, we often focus on the physical education of our children, but playgrounds are about so much more than exercise. They are where children learn to navigate risk, build relationships and develop the resilience that will serve them for life. However, according to the 2024 green space index, 2.3 million children in Britain under the age of nine, which is nearly one third, live more than a 10-minute walk from their nearest playground. That is a stark indicator of a growing play crisis in our country.

Playgrounds are vital spaces where children explore their world and themselves. Through play, they develop social skills, creativity and cognitive abilities. They learn to assess and embrace risk, make decisions and form friendships. Playgrounds are incubators for resilience, teaching children the skills to thrive in a challenging world. As a former scout leader who led teams on hikes up mountains, I have seen how giving children the chance to push themselves through outdoor physical challenges really builds their self-esteem. They climb up a mountain and are scared at the top, but then they realise how successful they have been in their achievement and how brilliant the experience has been. Playgrounds offer the chance for young people to challenge themselves—to climb higher, to swing faster and to jump that little bit further.

[Helen Maguire]

Despite the clear benefits of playgrounds for our youth, local authority budgets for playgrounds have declined drastically, with a 14% fall in annual park funding in England between 2009 and 2020. Nearly 800 playgrounds have been lost since 2013 and some councils now warn that they may need to remove or repurpose play areas simply to save money. It is shocking that, compared with the 1970s, children now spend 50% less time in unstructured outdoor play, and the 2020 British children's play survey revealed that children aged five to 11 spend just over three hours a day playing, mostly at home or in the garden rather than in nature and community spaces. During this period of playground decline, social media and smartphones have become increasingly pervasive, replacing active play, exploration and in-person socialising with passive scrolling, socialising through their phones and being less physically active.

I was a physical trainer for over 15 years and I am passionate about encouraging everyone to be more active. As a parent, I volunteered at my local primary school to support it in setting up its running club, and I saw at first hand the positive impact that physical activity has on young people. They were excited to be outside and loved focusing their energy on something other than the stress of homework. When they returned to class, they then felt calm and able to focus, which is also a benefit for teachers.

The public health implications of the decline in safe public spaces to play are profound. Over half of children fail to meet the recommended daily activity levels and 37% of 10 and 11-year-olds in England are now overweight or obese. The mental health impact is equally concerning, with nearly one in five children having a probable mental health condition. The reduction in access to unstructured outdoor play, alongside the rise in children's access to the digital world, has reshaped childhood, leading to isolation and inactivity.

Every child has the right to play—to feel energised and free—yet the opportunities for that freedom are shrinking. Without urgent action, generations of children will grow up deprived of the spaces that are so essential for their development and wellbeing. I urge this Government to prioritise access to play spaces in planning and funding decisions. Decades of under-investment and poor planning must be reversed. Play is not just a part of childhood; it is the foundation for healthy, happy and resilient adults.

4.54 pm

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Lewell-Buck. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) for securing this important debate.

Playgrounds are not just nice things to have. They are vital spaces where children grow, learn and thrive. In densely populated urban constituencies, like Ealing Southall in London, they are often a precious escape from overcrowded homes. But 14 years of Conservative Government have seen playgrounds and public spaces suffer under successive cuts. With councils starved of funding, playgrounds became a luxury that they could barely afford. Budgets for parks were slashed by more

than £350 million and the last Labour Government's multimillion-pound playground programme was cancelled. That led to crumbling playgrounds that were starved of cash, with councils often having to remove equipment that they could not afford to repair, and a 15% drop in the number of adventure playgrounds since 2017. The results have been devastating: there are fewer public playgrounds, and that harms children's physical and mental health, stifling their potential before it has a chance to bloom.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): I completely agree that the lack of funding for local authority playgrounds over the last 14 years has been catastrophic. In my constituency, we have had to rely on central Government funding to renovate playgrounds, in particular Haden Hill Park, next to Old Hill cricket ground. It is fantastic that we have been able to secure that funding through the towns fund—thank you, Minister—but we need to ensure that local authorities are focusing on this. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not acceptable that, in the current environment, we sometimes rely on central Government funding to support playgrounds?

Deirdre Costigan: I absolutely agree that we need fair funding for local councils and for playgrounds.

Access to play is a fundamental human right. It is written down in the United Nations convention on the rights of the child. There should be no argument about it, so it is heartening that the new Labour Government has immediately shown its commitment to play as a human right that cannot be denied to our children. Our changes—in some ways radical—to the national planning policy framework will, for the first time, insist that playgrounds are a consideration in all new developments. It will force developers to provide them, if we can back this up with legislation. In these changes, the Government have demonstrated a renewed commitment to a child's right to play and their right to be supported through development. I hope this can be followed by a new national play strategy for England—the first since the last Labour Government.

Research shows that many playgrounds fail to meet the needs of girls. In one study, 68% of girls said that there was nothing for them to do in the playground. Developers often tick the box by putting in a climbing frame but many girls prefer playground equipment that is social and collaborative: space to chat to their friends—swings are one example. Our future playgrounds must be inclusive, offering facilities for all children, and I hope that will be included in the Minister's plans.

Despite years of funding cuts, Labour-run councils like Ealing, which covers my constituency of Ealing Southall, are leading the charge to transform playgrounds and put children at the heart of local plans. Ealing council has already committed £2 million to renovate a staggering 22 playgrounds across the borough, including Ravenor Park, Spikes Bridge Park, Southall Park and Lammas Park in west Ealing. Ealing has worked with developers, including the developer of the Green Quarter in Southall, to ensure that developer-built playgrounds are publicly accessible. All new projects in Ealing are being assessed to ensure a minimum of 50% inclusive play, and that refurbishments consider the Make Space for Girls guidance.

In my former role as deputy leader of Ealing council, I championed “play on the way”, where play features like stepping stones on the grass build-outs at the corner of a street, and a hopscotch marked on the pavement, can even weave play into a child’s walk home from school.

What councils need most is secure funding from central Government, so this year’s 3.5% real-terms increase in council funding—that is £69 billion for councils—is a hugely welcome first step. I know we will hear more on this in the upcoming spending review. We need to ensure that councils like Ealing can sustain and expand playgrounds, especially in urban areas, where green and outdoor spaces are more limited. Playgrounds are not just for children; they are investments in the fabric of our society and in our future generations. To continue to achieve this Labour Government’s mission to break down the barriers to opportunity for every child, we need to keep pushing forward with our radical plans for play. It is time to reverse the damage of the past and create spaces that truly reflect the vibrant, equitable future that we want for our children.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (in the Chair): Order. I now need to put a three-minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches.

4.59 pm

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Lewell-Buck, and I thank the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) for securing this debate on the important yet overlooked area of playgrounds. Many Members have articulated the advantages of playgrounds, including in relation to mental health, the fact that people live in a concrete jungle and physical activity. However, in an era in which screens dominate our children’s attention and social media replaces face-to-face interaction, playgrounds are more critical than ever. I will focus today on two overlooked benefits that they provide: tackling obesity and building community cohesion.

First, let us consider the role of playgrounds in combating the epidemic of childhood obesity. The Government have laid out two vital objectives in their preventive agenda: halving the gap in healthy life expectancy, and creating the healthiest generation of children ever. Playgrounds directly contribute to the achievement of those goals through their activity. Healthy food is served in many such places, including fruit, vegetables and hot meals. For some children I know, those meals may be the only nutritious food that they receive daily. In communities where food insecurity is high, playgrounds are not just a place for fun; they are, without exaggeration, a lifeline. They ensure that children can play and thrive, fuelled by the nourishment they desperately need. Without these spaces, our fight against obesity and related diseases would become even harder.

Secondly, and my constituency of Leicester South has borne this out, adventure playgrounds foster something more intangible, and that is community cohesion. Children from all walks of life unite while they are playing, breaking down race, class and culture. Playgrounds remind us of our shared humanity in a world that is increasingly divided by polarisation and conflict. As children play, they create bonds. As the hon. Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) mentioned, the United Nations convention on the rights of the child recognises that in

article 31, which declares that play is a critical human right. Unfortunately, that right is under threat. The number of adventure playgrounds has fallen from 253 in 1980 to just 126 in 2021. Worse still, many of these playgrounds operate only for limited hours and lack resources, which means that children and the play workers do not create any meaningful bonds.

Closer to home, I must raise the plight of two incredible adventure playgrounds in Leicester South: St Andrews and Highfields, where I played as a child. Both are on the verge of shutting down, despite being in areas where provision for young children is already scarce. In particular, Highfields has been a pillar of its community for over half a century, but it still lacks secure tenureship. The loss of those playgrounds would tear the fabric of the communities that they serve, so will the Minister please meet me to see whether we can save them?

5.2 pm

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) on securing this debate. Playgrounds are a vital part of local community infrastructure, and free access to outside play space locally is something that all children should have the opportunity to enjoy. However, for disabled children and their families, this access is often not forthcoming, and I will briefly speak about that today.

As part of its Let’s Play Fair campaign, Scope carried out polling on playground accessibility. It found that one in 10 disabled children have minimal or no access to their local playground. Furthermore, one in seven people said that could not enjoy playgrounds as a family, because siblings were unable to play together. Half the parents of disabled children said that there were some accessibility problems with their local playground.

My oldest child is disabled. On many occasions, we have visited playgrounds that are unsafe for her due to her disability. Sometimes we can make things work; however, there are times when we just cannot. Structures are built in such a way that my husband and I cannot support her on them safely while also supervising her sister, and there are no accessible alternatives to things such as swings, which is her absolute favourite activity. She gets extremely upset that she cannot play—that she cannot take part—and who can blame her? Why is my child being told that she is not good enough to play and that my family are not welcome in this shared public space? The feeling that a community asset is not for you and your family cuts deep. I know that my daughter will face challenges throughout her life, but being able to play—to be a child—should not be one of them.

I would like to address some of the misgivings about accessible playgrounds. They do not necessarily need to cost more than non-accessible playgrounds. Retrofitting is expensive, but there is no reason why disabled children and their families are not being consulted about what they would need to make their new playground accessible. Indeed, there is even an argument that local authorities and other public bodies would be failing in their obligations under the Equality Act 2010 by not doing so.

Accessible playgrounds are not exclusively for disabled children. Good accessible playgrounds are inclusive playgrounds. Excellent playgrounds allow access for disabled children while maintaining and providing challenge for non-disabled children. The adventure castle at Hylands

[Jen Craft]

Estate in Chelmsford, the renovated playground at Wat Tyler Park in Basildon and, closer to home, Elm Road open space, or the Manor, in my patch provide accessible play equipment in a way that allows access for disabled and non-disabled children to play together. But these examples are few and far between, so I ask the Minister to encourage all those who provide playgrounds to bake accessibility into them, talk to children and their parents and finally make play spaces somewhere that all children and their families can enjoy.

5.6 pm

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) on securing this debate, and what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Lewell-Buck. Playgrounds are a vital resource, providing local communities with free and accessible activity space for children. Not only do playgrounds support children's mental and physical development, but they reduce loneliness by creating hubs for families to meet and socialise. Local families choose to put down their roots in Ilford South, thanks in large part to our excellent schools and fantastic parks. Almost a third of my constituents are children, so it is critical that they and their families have access to outdoor space and playgrounds.

When I served as leader of Redbridge council, I led a multimillion-pound investment programme into our playgrounds, delivering accessible equipment for local families to use. We knew that playgrounds and play spaces were as important for the physical and mental wellbeing of children and families as local libraries, as well as serving as a leveller for all social groups to be together, regardless of background or socioeconomic status.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) for securing this debate; I have two children under three, so I am delighted to come and contribute. Does the hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) agree that an extra benefit of investment in playgrounds is that they bring footfall into our town centres and nearby shops and cafés, thereby benefiting the local economy, too? I have one such example in Brecon at the King George V playing field, which I hope will help to regenerate our town centre.

Jas Athwal: I absolutely agree, and footfall is much needed in this day and age. Thanks to the investment, not only can families enjoy a free day out right on their doorstep, but local businesses benefit.

It is important that local authorities are empowered to fund play space for children and provide low-cost or free activities and space for families to gather. Giving access to play is vital for children and families, but that is simply not reflected, or even recognised, in the legislation that is being put forward, in which, shockingly, bats and newts are mentioned more than children. By enshrining protections for children's access to play in law, we can actively support children's development and ensure that children living in areas with less funding are not disproportionately impacted.

Introducing play sufficiency legislation is not simply about supporting children and families; it would also mark a significant step in improving equality and mental

and physical health, and it would bring England in step with Scotland. While the country starts to recover from the unprecedented cost of living crisis, while fighting a decline in public health and an obesity epidemic, free and affordable play spaces, which promote physical activity, can and must play a critical role.

5.9 pm

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Lewell-Buck. I congratulate my neighbour, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes), on securing this debate, which has appropriately fallen on the day we are debating the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. Although we know that many of a child's social, developmental and exercise needs are met through their learning environment and school, it would be a mistake to underestimate the importance of outdoor equipped play space. Trips to the park after school help children form strong bonds to help their resilience, but they also give parents important time outside school and home, and the chance to make good friends for life. I can attest to that with my friend Nicki, who I met 20 years ago when our daughters Molly and Becca got to know each other on the swings at Springdale park—a park, incidentally, that has fantastic inclusive play, as it was constructed very close to the local children's hospice, and there was consultation with the hospice on what it would need.

In a 2019 Mumsnet survey, one in four parents said that a lack of outdoor play had contributed to their children's mental health issues. That is before covid saw them locked up, and councils' financial crisis saw the gates stay locked when councils simply did not have the money to fix the equipment. Lib Dems believe that playgrounds play a vital role in community engagement, child development and physical and mental health for children, young people and their families. We welcome the Play England amendment to the national planning policy framework, which will protect play and lead all developers to fulfil their responsibilities.

Residents in Wimborne in my Mid Dorset and North Poole constituency have real concerns—I have raised them before with the Minister, which he will remember—about promised play areas in their developments that turn out to just be a bench, a Tellytubby hill and a dog bin. The residents then have to pay extra to maintain the non-play area.

As the hon. Member for Bournemouth East said, the last major play investment project was under the last Labour Government, called Playbuilder. Unfortunately, as fantastic as that equipment was, it is now failing. In 2023, *The Guardian* reported that the average budgets for parks had fallen in real terms by more than a third. In BCP, as has already been referenced, a plan for play has been developed, with a vision to provide high-quality, accessible, safe and inclusive play. I completely accept the hon. Member's criticism of the equipment in Bournemouth. I just say that the previous Conservative-led Bournemouth council did not bother to insure its play equipment, which meant that every time there was an act of vandalism, the community would have to pay to fix it. That cannot be allowed. As a result, the new Lib Dem-led council is now using £3.9 million of the strategic community infrastructure fund to address this.

In my ward, we had a playground that was taken out in the 1980s, which the community worked together to re-imagine. Colin and Caroline put two years' work in,

and more than £100,000 was raised from the community with help from the council, but it should not come down to that. Parishes and neighbourhood forums are able to do their bit, but until this is made a statutory requirement, it is impossible for councils that have statutory requirements for social services and housing to put this as a priority.

Liberal Democrats would love to see the Government work with councils on sustainable settlements that allow them to invest not just in the basics, but in activities to build happy lives for everyone. Every community needs play, and I agree with the hon. Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) about considering girls and incidental play as well, especially when families have no gardens and limited access to nature, and the only safe place left is the park. If we want happy, healthy children to become resilient, problem-solving and active adults, we need to act now. I welcome the Minister becoming the next Andy Burnham, and would love to see a Playbuilder 2, but this time, could we please have equipment that is fully inclusive for children with disabilities and neurodivergence, and of all ages and genders? It should also be sustainable and not a one-off, so that the equipment does not have to be locked up again in 10 years' time.

5.13 pm

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Lewell-Buck. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) on securing this debate. His speech this afternoon has shown Members in the House that his half of Bournemouth are very lucky to have him. He is lucky to have them too, and I know that he works very hard for his constituents, considering that he has been a friend for a number of years.

Playgrounds are essential to the physical and mental wellbeing of our children. They are places where children exercise, build social connections and foster creativity, yet the provision of playgrounds by local authorities remains uneven across the country, with concerning disparities that demand our attention. According to the Fields in Trust group's green space index, an alarming 2.3 million children in Britain under the age of nine—31% of the total—live more than a 10-minute walk from their nearest playground. Even more troubling is the fact that 40% of councils report that over a third of children face that challenge, with some areas seeing the figure rise as high as 65%.

That disparity reflects the struggles that local authorities face in maintaining playgrounds. Budget constraints mean that some councils have been forced to remove or repurpose play areas, depriving communities of vital green spaces. Regional variations further highlight the inequality. For example, children in Scotland enjoy access to nearly five times more public playgrounds than their peers in London. Welsh children have access to more than twice as many playgrounds as those in London.

The previous Government recognised the importance of improving access to quality green spaces, with initiatives such as the £9 million levelling up parks fund and an additional £30 million of investment focused on improving facilities for young families. The funding aimed to enhance green spaces in deprived areas, support tree planting and improve play areas, with up to £85,000 available per area.

The measures were complemented by nearly £60 billion of funding for local authorities in 2024-25, which was a 9.4% increase compared with the year before, with most of the funding left un-ringfenced to promote local choice.

The Conservative party firmly believes in empowering local authorities to make decisions to best suit their communities, but central Government must also ensure that councils are equipped with sufficient resources to deliver essential services such as playgrounds. The revised national planning policy framework provides an opportunity: as hon. Members have outlined, play spaces will now be included, which I welcome, but that needs to be enforceable under the NPPF. As outlined by the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade), we often find that developers promise things to local people, but local authorities cannot take the enforcement action necessary to ensure that those facilities are built. I have found that within my own constituency, which has seen excessive development. I look to the Minister to enforce that action through the NPPF, and through regulatory statutory instruments if need be, so that local councils have the power to ensure that those services are provided.

Unfortunately, challenges persist. The Local Government Association has estimated that the employer national insurance contribution hike will cost councils £1.77 billion, yet only £515 million of new funding has been provided to support the increase. The shortfall puts further strain on local budgets, making it even harder to maintain and improve local playgrounds. I hope the Minister knows that I often try not to be too political, but the decision in the last Budget to scrap the charitable status of private schools means that facilities provided for local children in local areas by private schools may be taken out of service. That will affect all kinds of children who are entitled to use the many playgrounds that private schools provide.

To wind up, the provision of playgrounds is about more than just swings and slides; it is about investing in our future, fostering healthier communities and ensuring that every child has the opportunity to thrive. I say to the Minister that we are willing to work together to protect and enhance these vital spaces, recognising their role in creating a fairer and healthier society.

5.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair for the first time, Mrs Lewell-Buck. I know that you are always fair, but I know that you can be hard as well, if need be—hopefully I will not stretch the Chair's patience today.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) for securing this debate and for the way in which he has led it. He took us on a beautiful tour of Bournemouth, but I most enjoyed the way that he brought the views of his constituents into the room and on to the record—to get 640 responses to anything is quite something. It shows the amount of energy and interest in Bournemouth, but clearly, judging from the contributions of colleagues, that energy and interest is replicated across the country.

Playgrounds are a vital part of our social infrastructure. As we have heard, they contribute to the health and development of our children and young people across

[Alex Norris]

the nation. Importantly for us as a Government, they also build on our mission of opportunities for all by ensuring that everyone has the best start in life.

I pay special tribute to the parents who my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East referred to, and I commend them for the insights that they gave to him and that he has been able to give to us. I also recognise Councillors Millie Earl, Sandra Moore and Andy Hadley, and Rebecca Whelan-Edmonds and Barbara Uphoff, for their work on a play strategy in Bournemouth—there is clearly something very special going on in the area—and Councillor Sharon Carr-Brown for her work to improve the quality of play in her ward and beyond.

I also thank Eugene Minogue and Play England for its work, including the support it has given to Bournemouth and to my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East. He asked me some specific questions, which I will come to later, but I will first pick up on a couple of the themes that were echoed by other hon. Members.

First, it is important to start with the principle that unstructured, free play is important in child development. Fun in general is important—it is not all about development; children have to be able to enjoy themselves and we need to make sure that the spaces are there. We have a strong, able and technically evolved competitor for our children's education: screen time is part of this conversation. The answer in such circumstances is never to smash the machines; we cannot unlearn the technology, so we have to compete. If the alternative is compelling, our offer must be compelling. I will make a couple more points on that later. At a time when the cost of living challenges mean that parents are making difficult choices, those offers have to be there and they have to be accessible.

My hon. Friend and a number of other hon. Members said that this is also about social justice. For many in my community, the Bulwell Forest is their garden. They do not have the garden of their own, so that is their play area, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) said. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) said, play and parks should be a great leveller and accessible to all—just walk up and pitch in. Too often, however, that is not the case for children with a disability, as my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) said, nor is it for neurodiverse children, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) said. Whatever plans we bring forward, we have to weave in accessibility. We need to seek to tackle those inequalities.

I will make a few points on where we are as a Government and address the questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East. The early years of childhood are crucial for the healthy development of our children, and physical activity is at the root of that, but as the hon. Member for Leicester South (Shokat Adam) said, we face a real challenge around childhood obesity. Over 2 million children in this country do not do 60 minutes of physical activity each day—that problem is coming down the line for us. I will of course meet with the hon. Gentleman to talk about the adventure playgrounds in his community.

We know that this is a social justice issue, as I said, because the levels of activities are lowest among the poorest children, children from ethnic minority backgrounds and girls. Factors such as poverty, lack of access to safe

green spaces and poor local natural resources contribute to this inequality. We also know that parents are increasingly concerned about the welfare of their children and about antisocial behaviour, which plays into the Government's crime mission. We have to make sure that we have community policing to give reassurance.

The lack of physical activity among children needs to change, and active play is one of the key ways that we can make that change and get children exercising, stretching their minds and, as the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) said, building skills, problem solving and building resilience—all of those come through active play. Whether it is at adventure playgrounds, sports facilities or park playgrounds, or in the natural environment, all those things need to be present and accessible for our children.

We have a lot of parks and green spaces in this country—27,000 of them. They are much-loved local assets and can provide opportunities for free. As has been said, that reflects the cost of living. The great thing is that our children are telling us the answer. As so often in politics, if we stop talking for long enough, generally people will tell us the answer. The 2024 children's people and nature survey for England tells us that the single most important factor for encouraging children to go outside is access to playgrounds. We tear our hair out about why our children are not out more often, which comes up in debates, as hon. Members have said, but the answer is there ready for us—access to playgrounds.

Local authorities are at the root of this. Five in every six of our urban parks are managed by local authorities. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about community power. The local authority's connection to local communities is about empowering them; I have no desire, as the Minister, to make granular decisions about play parks in Stoke, Stockport, Bournemouth, Thurrock, Ealing or wherever. I have very strong views about Nottingham, but my role as Minister is to get the powers and the resources to those communities to shape things for themselves.

The hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell talked about some of the pressure that councils have been under in recent years. There is no doubt that playgrounds have been seen as a discretionary, non-statutory service. As a result, we have seen the decline that she talked about. I am very proud that the recent Budget had the best settlement for local government, with significant resources being made available. That will start to see some of those important services being built back.

I am passionate about, and could speak all day on, the Green Flag award scheme, and I thank super-judge Chris Worman for the work that he is doing. That is a really good way of ensuring that we have quality offerings, of which we have over 2,000 in the UK. In the Department we have novated the parks working group to build on that work, and Chris is playing a big part in that. I am going to ask that group to expand to ensure that play parks and playgrounds are part of that conversation, so that we are tackling some of the inequalities and the accessibility issues.

I will address the specific asks of my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East. First, I would be delighted to meet Eugene Minogue from Play England to discuss the issue. I am very keen to meet my hon. Friend's constituents, and having had the aural tour of Bournemouth, I am keen to have the physical one. With regard to the 2008

play strategy, I am going to deftly sidestep any historical comparisons to individual politicians and say that as part of our opportunities Government mission, we are working with sector experts around play provision and will build on what has been done in the past. I steal liberally from what has been done before—often there is not much that is genuinely new—so we will building on that strategy and making significant reference to it in our work, while making it fit for the modern day.

We are going to take a similar approach with regard to play sufficiency legislation. I want to follow the evidence with the experts in communities, and I want to understand more about Scotland and Wales, because there is clearly a distinction and difference there, and about where the law could augment that. I would not want to run ahead of that work. My officials are working with those in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to look further into sports fields, and I will keep my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East updated.

On mapping play facilities, we want to get the burden on local authorities right so that we do not put too much on them. We are looking at other ways of doing it, however, because it is an important goal. One of the biggest driving factors beyond quality is distance. My community is a former mining community, so we have lots of country parks and people think that we are well provided for, but the gates are never on our side, which is a cause of great frustration. It is therefore about ensuring that we know what the distances are, as well as being about access. There is a significant correlation between mental health across the population and the distance to green and open spaces.

Rather than asking local authorities to map play facilities, last August the Office for National Statistics produced work on access to green space for the first time, and we are committed to further refining that work to ensure that it is doing the job. Similarly, the Green Flag award scheme provides a map of where the highest-quality facilities are. We are keen to get that mapping right, and to ensure that we understand that equity piece and which communities may need greater support.

I am conscious that my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East will need some time to wind up. I look forward to meeting him and his constituents, and I look forward to working with hon. Members in the spirit referred to by the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes), and by other hon. Members throughout the debate.

5.28 pm

Tom Hayes: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friends the Members for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) and for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger), the hon. Member for Leicester South (Shockat Adam), my hon. Friends the Members for Thurrock (Jen Craft) and for Ilford South (Jas Athwal), the hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick), who is no longer here—if I have mispronounced the name of his constituency, I apologise—and everyone else who has spoken in the debate. I thank the Conservative and Liberal Democrat spokespeople, the hon. Members for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes) and for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade), and the Minister for their comments.

In bringing forward the debate, I wanted to ensure that the people of Bournemouth East were heard. As the Minister said, the fact that 642 local residents responded to the survey shows that there is an enormous appetite for something better when it comes to play. I want to communicate to the people of Bournemouth East that their priority will be my priority and, clearly, from what we have heard from the Minister, the Government's priority. If we do not invest in our children by investing in play, we are sending entirely the wrong signals. After all, all our children, all over our country, deserve nothing less than the very best childhood.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the provision of playgrounds by local authorities.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 8 January 2025

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

UK and Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council 2024

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): The 12th UK-Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council was held from 19 to 21 November 2024 in London. The council was attended by elected leaders and representatives from Anguilla, Ascension Island, Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Montserrat, the Pitcairn Islands, St Helena, the sovereign base areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia, Tristan da Cunha and the Turks and Caicos Islands.

The overseas territories are an invaluable part of the British family. The UK has a responsibility to ensure security and good governance of the overseas territories and their peoples.

The JMC is the highest forum for political dialogue and consultation between the elected leaders of the overseas territories and UK Ministers. We met under the strapline of “Listen, Transform, Deliver—Together”. This reflects the UK’s desire to build closer relationships, based on mutual respect and inclusion, and to transform the UK’s relationship with the overseas territories for us both to deliver greater security and prosperity.

In my capacity as Minister for the Overseas Territories, I chaired the council. Other ministerial colleagues who attended the discussions included the Home Office Minister (Lord Hanson); the Minister for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard); the Minister for Climate, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy); the Minister for Public Health and Prevention, my hon. Friend the Member for Gorton and Denton (Andrew Gwynne); and the Minister for Early Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan). Representatives from UK Export Finance and the Joint Maritime Security Centre also joined us. His Majesty the King also spent time meeting with representatives of the OTs at the annual reception for the diplomatic corps at Buckingham Palace.

The key themes of discussion at this year’s council were: resetting the relationship between the UK and the overseas territories; security and irregular migration; economic diversification and resilience; tackling illicit finance; environment and climate change; overseas development assistance; and breaking down barriers to opportunity for citizens. Discussions were positive and constructive, reflecting a shared desire to transform the relationship.

The elected leaders of the overseas territories warmly welcomed the five principles I set out to guide the UK’s relationship with the elected Governments of the overseas territories:

devolution and democratic autonomy for the overseas territories;

listening to the overseas territories, following the principle of “nothing about you without you”;

partnership with the overseas territories based on mutual respect and inclusion—rights come with responsibilities;

good governance and ensuring proper democratic accountability and regulation; and,

defending the overseas territories’ security, autonomy and rights, including the right of self-determination.

The council agreed priorities and set out commitments and areas for joint work in the year ahead. Representatives welcomed that each UK Government Department has an assigned Minister with responsibility for the overseas territories. I convene and chair this group to ensure mission-driven focus on the overseas territories. Representatives welcomed the extension of access to the Leadership College for Government for permanent secretaries (or equivalents) of the overseas territories. This will build expertise and help develop senior peer relationships between the overseas territories and the UK.

We discussed the complex and varied security and irregular migration challenges of the overseas territories. The UK and the overseas territories’ Governments expressed their solidarity with the Government and people of the Turks and Caicos Islands in respect of the security challenges they currently face and committed to working together across the British family to assist where possible.

We discussed the vital role of the overseas territories’ stewardship of internationally important and unique environments and ecosystems, including protecting 94% of unique British biodiversity. Representatives welcomed the commitment of the Foreign Secretary that climate and nature crisis will be central to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office’s work, which builds on the Prime Minister’s commitment that climate and nature will be at the centre of the cross-UK Government missions.

We discussed economic growth. We resolved to promote and encourage trade and investment as key engines of prosperity.

Tackling illicit finance across the UK, OTs and Crown dependencies is a Government priority. We agreed to work in partnership on this important agenda. I emphasised the importance of implementing publicly accessible registers for beneficial ownership (PARBOs). The UK also set out the ambition for this becoming the global norm and the expectation that the OTs would implement registers that are fully accessible to the public. Montserrat has joined Gibraltar in implementing a public register and commitments were made by St Helena—which passed legislation earlier this month—and the Falkland Islands to implement these by April 2025. Anguilla, Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands and the Turks and Caicos Islands will have legislation on legitimate interest access registers of beneficial ownership approved through their respective legislatures by April 2025, with implementation by June 2025 or earlier. The Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary attended the closing session of the council, underscoring their determination to reset the relationship with the overseas territories.

We agreed a joint communiqué, which was issued following the conclusion of the council and published on the gov.uk website.

[HCWS356]

Written Correction

Wednesday 8 January 2025

Other Correction

HELEN MORGAN

Winter Preparedness

The following extract is from the statement on Winter Preparedness on 18 December 2024.

Helen Morgan: This year is very concerning so far. A&Es have overflowed through spring, summer and autumn. At my local hospital trust, Shrewsbury and Telford,

one in three ambulances have had to wait more than an hour to hand over patients, while patients with devastating cancer diagnoses have had to wait months for crucial scan results. Across England, more than 7 million people are on waiting lists.

[*Official Report*, 18 December 2024; Vol. 759, c. 350.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan):

Helen Morgan: This year is very concerning so far. A&Es have overflowed through spring, summer and autumn. At my local hospital trust, Shrewsbury and Telford, one in three ambulances have had to wait more than an hour to hand over patients, while patients with devastating cancer diagnoses have had to wait months for crucial scan results. Across England, more than **6 million** people are on waiting lists.

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