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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)

Monday 13 January 2025

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-NINTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 9 JULY 2024]

THIRD YEAR OF THE REIGN OF HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 760

NINTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2024-2025

House of Commons

Monday 13 January 2025

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Neighbourhood Policing

1. **Shockat Adam** (Leicester South) (Ind): What steps she is taking to ensure that the police have adequate resources to help tackle neighbourhood crime. [902103]

2. **Bobby Dean** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What steps she is taking to improve the effectiveness of community policing. [902104]

11. **Dr Rosena Allin-Khan** (Tooting) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Metropolitan police on the effectiveness of community policing. [902113]

17. **Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): What recent progress her Department has made on improving neighbourhood policing. [902119]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): Before I respond, I am sure that the whole House will want to remember PC Rosie Prior, who was tragically killed on Saturday while helping at the scene of an accident, and Ryan Welford, who was also killed. PC Prior's death is a tragic reminder of the

dedication and bravery that police officers show every single day to keep us safe. All our thoughts are with her family, friends and colleagues at this difficult time.

As the Prime Minister announced last month in the “Plan for Change”, we are determined to restore neighbourhood policing and to put 13,000 additional police, police community support officers and special constables back on the beat.

Shockat Adam: I refer the House to my registered interests, and I echo the sentiments expressed by the Home Secretary.

Last year, the Leicestershire police panel raised serious concerns about being underfunded, having received a real-terms cut of 20% over the past 13 years. Due to this funding crisis, the police simply do not have enough manpower for night-time patrols. In the Clarendon Park area there has been a wave of burglaries in local businesses—the Christopher James Deli, Loros and Spice Bazaar are three of eight that have been smashed and grabbed over the past two months. At the local crime summit that I arranged to discuss the situation, one owner, Jaskaran Dutta, said:

“We do everything we can to survive in this incredibly difficult economic time. All we ask is that the government supports us by improving policing and security”.

What is the Secretary of State doing to address these concerns?

Yvette Cooper: Under the previous Conservative Government, neighbourhood policing was decimated. The proportion of people who said that they never saw the police on the beat doubled. They took police off the beat and did not put them back, which is why we are setting out a neighbourhood policing guarantee. We have increased funding for police forces by £1 billion next year, including £100 million specifically to kickstart recruitment for neighbourhood policing.

Bobby Dean: A Carshalton resident had her car stolen from her driveway. There is video footage of it, but the police just gave her a crime reference number and closed

the case. Local businesses on Wallington high street tell me that organised shoplifters are acting with impunity. The Home Secretary touched on recruitment being part of the solution, but what else can the Government do now to help my constituents feel safe?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member is right to talk about the deep frustration felt in communities, including local businesses and town centres, about not just the absence of neighbourhood policing, which we need to turn around, but the weakening of powers over the past 14 years on things such as shoplifting. That is why we are introducing new respect orders and strengthening powers on shoplifting and assaults on shop workers.

Dr Allin-Khan: We all know that well-resourced neighbourhood policing, with bobbies on the beat working in the community, is central not just to solving crime but to preventing it. We saw some great results in Tooting just last year, with a special operation resulting in a 70% cut in crime. Fourteen years of Tory government have decimated our local police teams, despite our brilliant London Mayor pulling out all the stops to bolster the numbers. Will the Secretary of State pledge that our local communities will have properly resourced policing teams under the new Labour Government?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right about the importance of having neighbourhood policing teams working in communities with local residents and businesses, knowing the kinds of crimes and challenges that that area faces. That is why we are determined not just to get neighbourhood police back on the beat, with funding in place to do so, but to ensure that, as part of a neighbourhood policing guarantee, the officers are not abstracted to deal with other things.

Perran Moon: In 2022 the chief constable of Devon and Cornwall Police was suspended for misconduct, and last November the interim chief constable was also suspended. Now the deputy police and crime commissioner has also resigned. Does the Home Secretary share my concerns about the leadership of Devon and Cornwall Police and the impact on neighbourhood policing morale, as well as the fact that the taxpayer is paying for three chief constables, two of whom have been suspended?

Yvette Cooper: I am aware of the points that my hon. Friend raises, and I do have concerns. It is really important that all police forces can strengthen their neighbourhood policing and have strong leadership right through the police force. We will set out a new police reform White Paper to ensure that measures are in place to strengthen leadership and standards across policing.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): A focus on neighbourhood policing is welcome; we have seen it in Staffordshire for some time. Police leaders have said that if they do not have the flexibility to recruit as they need to, there is a risk that police officers will end up having to fill vacancies in specialist areas. Will the Home Secretary listen to police leaders and give them that flexibility?

Yvette Cooper: The Chair of the Home Affairs Committee makes an important point. We have said that the neighbourhood policing teams, which we are determined to support, should include police officers and police community support officers, as well as special constables, who too often are underused and underappreciated, in order to recognise the mix of disciplines that we need for the strongest and most effective policing.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Excellent partnership work between Gwent Police, Newport city council and our business improvement district saw crime down by 25% in our city centre at the end of last year, although there is still much to do to improve confidence after neighbourhood policing was slashed under the previous Government. Does the Home Secretary agree that visibility is key, and will she update us on police numbers in Wales?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point, because this is about visibility, partnership and powers, and she rightly talks about the impact that this kind of work can have. We want to strengthen the work of police officers across England and Wales by strengthening the powers they have to tackle shoplifting and street theft—snatch theft—which have both increased in recent years.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): The previous Government left office with record police numbers, but police and crime commissioners are deeply concerned that the funding formula and settlement, combined with the Government's national insurance tax raid, will force cuts to frontline police numbers. My Labour police and crime commissioner faces a £3 million shortfall, and there are projections of 3,500 officers being lost nationwide. Will the Home Secretary take responsibility if police numbers fall in the coming years?

Yvette Cooper: I should point out to the hon. Gentleman that his Government took neighbourhood police officers off the streets, meaning thousands fewer on the streets—the number of PCSOs halved and the number of special constables dropped by two thirds. That is the Conservatives' shameful record, which people know because they can see it—they do not see police on the streets, as a result of his Government's actions. He raises the issue of funding. This Government have had to add an additional £170 million to police forces this year because the settlement that his party left them with was not enough to cover this year's pay rise. They let policing down.

Matt Vickers: The Home Secretary proudly quotes the funding settlement while failing to mention that £230 million of it will be snatched straight back as a result of her Government's national insurance tax raid on our police forces. What can be invested in frontline policing is largely determined by how she manages the Home Office budget. Does she agree that it was wrong to spend £10,000 on a swanky dinner for civil servants, and how will she ensure that never happens again?

Yvette Cooper: I am afraid I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that his party not only let policing and communities down by taking neighbourhood police off the streets, but let police down on the funding.

This Government are providing an increase in police funding of up to £1 billion next year, on top of the additional funding we had to provide for policing this financial year because his party left a huge black hole in not just Home Office or police officer funding, but overall funding for public services across the board—a shameful legacy that we have had to turn around.

Firefighters: Occupational Diseases

3. **Brian Leishman** (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): What discussions her Department has had with the Fire Brigades Union on improving protections for firefighters against occupational diseases. [902105]

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Dame Angela Eagle): We engage regularly with the Fire Brigades Union and we take very seriously the health and safety of firefighters, who risk their lives for our communities every day. The Home Office is reviewing recent academic research to evaluate risks posed by contaminants and the effectiveness of decontamination procedures. We will share our findings with the fire and rescue authorities, which hold the legal responsibility to protect firefighters against those risks.

Brian Leishman: I thank the Minister for her answer. Exposure to toxic substances is an avoidable risk and every firefighter should have access to the resources they need to protect themselves. The dangerous nature of being a firefighter has also been amplified as the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has had more than 1,400 frontline firefighter jobs cut since 2010, a reduction of nearly 20%. Does the Home Secretary agree that the fire service needs proper investment and a national body with legal standing to set standards on fire cover, training, equalities, and health and safety?

Dame Angela Eagle: My right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention is looking at all fire and rescue issues and considering all possibilities, including potential reorganisations, as we move the services forward.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Will the Minister look at early diagnosis for firefighters because, very sadly, many suffer very bad ill health in retirement? If they are diagnosed early, treatment can be provided to improve the quality and the length of their lives.

Dame Angela Eagle: I agree that this is an important area and that much more work needs to be done to consider effective contaminants and risks from the dangers that firefighters put themselves in every day to protect life.

Rural Crime

4. **Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): What assessment she has made of the impact of crime on rural communities. [902106]

14. **Jenny Riddell-Carpenter** (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle rural crime. [902116]

18. **Charlotte Cane** (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): What assessment she has made of the impact of crime on rural communities. [902120]

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): We all understand the devastating harm that crime can cause in rural communities. The Government are committed to taking action, which is why we will be enacting the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023 to tackle the theft of agricultural machinery and equipment. We will strengthen enforcement on fly-tipping and antisocial behaviour, and we will deliver more rural patrols through our neighbourhood policing guarantee.

Helen Morgan: I thank the Minister for her answer. She will know that the funding allocations for policing are based on reported crime, not underlying crime rates. In rural areas such as North Shropshire, people say that they do not always report a crime when it happens. Residents in Oswestry and Whitchurch tell me that they do not bother to phone the police because they do not think anyone will come. Will she consider reassessing the formula to ensure that in rural areas the funding reflects the level of underlying crime?

Dame Diana Johnson: I reassure the hon. Lady that funding for the year 2025-26 for her police force will be £316.3 million, an increase of £80 million on the figures from this year. I encourage all people who are victims of crime to report it. We need that information so that the police can then make the required resources available.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: In my constituency, fly-tipping on farms and private land and the targeted theft of heating oil are causing profound problems for families and businesses alike. Will the Minister update me on progress to tackle rural crime, and will the Home Office consider setting up a rural taskforce, working across Departments, to tackle these issues?

Dame Diana Johnson: I absolutely share my hon. Friend's concerns about the extent of rural crime, particularly fly-tipping. Recent research shows that 80% of farmers say they are affected by fly-tipping. I am particularly concerned about the targeted theft of heating oil from families and businesses at this time of year. As I said, we will be strengthening neighbourhood policing and we will see more patrols in rural areas, which will help. We will also have forthcoming legislation to provide the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs with the powers it needs to support local authorities in exercising new fly-tipping enforcement powers.

Charlotte Cane: Will the Minister meet me to discuss the effect that rural crime, particularly hare coursing and, as we have heard today, theft from farms and sheds, has on residents in Ely and East Cambridgeshire?

Dame Diana Johnson: I am always very happy to meet hon. Members. The national wildlife crime unit has been doing some very good work, including overseeing the national police response to hare coursing and Operation Galileo, which has resulted in a 40% reduction in offences in that area, but I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): Right across the towns and villages I represent, people have seen, as the rural policing presence has declined, predictable increases in shoplifting, antisocial behaviour, farm break-ins and fly-tipping. We cannot allow that to be tolerated. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that my local police have the resources and powers they need to take those crimes seriously?

Dame Diana Johnson: The neighbourhood policing guarantee applies not just to towns and cities, of course, but to rural communities, so we will see a far greater police presence out and about in those communities. The Home Office is currently working with the National Police Chiefs' Council on a rural and wildlife crime strategy, to crack down on some of the crime and disorder that has worsened in recent years.

Burglary

5. **Monica Harding** (Esher and Walton) (LD): What steps she is taking to support the police to tackle burglaries. [902107]

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): Burglary is a particularly invasive crime that has a profound impact on the security of individuals—as I know from personal experience—as well as on the wider community. For too long a culture has been allowed to develop whereby victims of burglary and other crimes fear that even if they report what has happened, no one will come and nothing will be done. That is the culture we are determined to tackle through our safer streets mission and our commitment to neighbourhood policing.

Monica Harding: In my local authority area, 92% of burglaries went unsolved, with police failing to identify suspects—that is the worst figure for any community in the country—and in Surrey as a whole, 63% of burglaries were not even attended by police. This has contributed to a decline in confidence in local policing among my constituents. How, specifically, will the Government's new police performance unit and their neighbourhood policing guarantee ensure that my constituents can feel safe in their homes, and will the Minister join my party in committing to a statutory burglary response guarantee to ensure that all domestic burglaries are attended by a police officer?

Dame Diana Johnson: The police have made a commitment in England and Wales to attend the scene of every home burglary, so I am concerned by what the hon. Lady has said about her local force. The College of Policing has set out good practice for the investigation of burglaries, which should be followed by police forces, and which sets standards for what should be expected as well as explaining how best to deal with victims. I am mindful of what she has said today and will write to her with details of what more can be done.

Violence against Women and Girls

6. **Dr Danny Chambers** (Winchester) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle violence against women and girls. [902108]

12. **Alison Hume** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle violence against women and girls. [902114]

25. **Steve Witherden** (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle violence against women and girls. [902127]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): This Government will treat violence against women and girls as the national emergency that it is, and later this year our new comprehensive violence against women and girls strategy will spell out how we plan to fulfil our unprecedented commitment to halve that violence. In the interim, we have announced Raneem's law, whereby domestic abuse specialists will be embedded in 999 control rooms, and we are working with police to develop a national framework to track and target high-harm offenders. We are piloting new domestic abuse protection orders in selected areas, and we have outlined new measures to protect women against stalking and spiking.

Dr Chambers: The entire country was appalled by the terrible crime of girls being groomed by gangs of older men, and outraged by the lack of action taken by authorities to help protect those victims. It is about 10 years since these crimes first came to light. Since then we have had the Jay inquiry, which has made 20 recommendations. Will the Government commit to implementing all those recommendations, in full and at pace, to help protect future victims?

Jess Phillips: I thank the hon. Gentleman for both the tone and the sentiment of his question, and I hope that everyone in the House agrees with him. I spent the weekend in my surgery dealing with cases that are live today involving the grooming of both boys and girls by organised groups of varying sorts. It is, in fact, 15 years since the original Jay report on the events in Rotherham. As for the recommendations of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, we will work at pace with the stakeholders, including the victims and Professor Alexis Jay, to ensure that what was intended in those recommendations can happen. I will do that as quickly as it can possibly be done, but I will not do what was done by the last Government and just say, "Yeah, sure" and then leave it to chance.

Alison Hume: North Yorkshire is the largest rural county in the country. Behind the beauty of the villages and hamlets in my constituency of Scarborough and Whitby lies an ugly truth: on average, victims in rural areas are subject to domestic abuse for 25% longer than those in urban areas and are half as likely to report it. Can the Minister reassure the House that more funding to tackle rural domestic violence is part of the Government's strategy to halve violence against women and girls?

Jess Phillips: The strategy to halve violence against women and girls is for every single part of our country. The Government recognise that victims in rural and remote areas face particular barriers in fleeing abuse and accessing support. We are already driving forward a range of activities that will support rural victims. The Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 will require local commissioners to develop joint needs assessments for

victims of domestic abuse, to identify gaps in support. I encourage all Members to engage with that process when it comes to their local area, and I will happily work with rural MPs in this House to make sure that that is the case.

Steve Witherden: Palestinian women detained in Israeli prisons face sexual assault, beatings and threats of rape and death, according to United Nations reports. Given our commitment to tackling violence against women and girls, what discussions is the Minister having with Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office colleagues about the implications of the gender-based violence faced by Palestinians, particularly as Israel continues to deny access to detention sites?

Jess Phillips: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. My FCDO colleagues sit on the violence against women and girls sub-group for the mission, and I have every faith that they take the issues that he talks about incredibly seriously. We have to protect women the world over.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): A consistent finding of the serious case reviews into child sexual exploitation is that the authorities have turned a blind eye in cases where they believe that a child, often as young as 13, is in a consensual sexual relationship with an older man. Of course, regardless of whether the girl believes that she has given consent or not, the adult is committing a criminal offence. Does the Minister agree that one way we might stop the next child rape gang is by insisting that, in all cases, adults who have sex with children are investigated and prosecuted?

Jess Phillips: Absolutely. From my years of working on the frontline, I know that the boyfriend model of consent to get young people into these groups is undoubtedly one of the most common in that field. I absolutely agree that in any case where any adult has sex with any child, they should be investigated, charged and convicted. A fundamental part of our violence against women and girls strategy is about prevention and working with young people, who are a growing cohort of both abusers and victims in this space, to ensure that we are acting to prevent and not just to protect.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): When it comes to keeping children, especially girls, safe from violence and abuse, there has been a lot of talk about inquiries over the last week; indeed, some comments have been more constructive than others. Inquiries can be a powerful tool for uncovering the truth about injustice, but they only reach their full potential when there is a duty of candour that requires public officials and authorities to co-operate fully. The Government have committed to bringing that duty into force, so can the Minister and her colleagues commit to a timeline for introducing the Hillsborough law to Parliament?

Jess Phillips: The number of national public inquiries that we have had—for example, into Hillsborough, for which nobody has been held accountable—shows the importance of the Hillsborough law and the duty of candour. Obviously, we committed to it in our manifesto, and it will absolutely be introduced by this Government. We will keep in touch about the timeline for that.

Equipment Theft

7. Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): When she plans to bring the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023 into force. [902109]

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): I commend the hon. Gentleman's work in bringing forward this legislation and reiterate the Government's commitment to safeguarding rural communities. We will implement the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023, and we fully support its intention to tackle the theft and resale of high-value equipment, particularly for use in an agricultural setting.

Greg Smith: I am grateful to the Minister for his kind words and to the Government for their support for what was my private Member's Bill and is now the Act. The commencement date for the Act was in January last year, but it requires a statutory instrument to be moved to bring it into full force. When will that statutory instrument be moved? Can he assure me that there is no delay because of the equipment manufacturers, who of course benefit massively from crime because they get to sell another one?

Dan Jarvis: Let me reassure the hon. Gentleman. As he knows, the Act requires secondary legislation to take effect. We are currently considering the views of those who may be affected by the legislation, but we intend that the regulations will be in place by the summer.

Tackling Crime: Newcastle-under-Lyme

8. Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help tackle crime in Newcastle-under-Lyme constituency. [902110]

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): We are strengthening how we tackle crime throughout the country, including in Newcastle-under-Lyme. Our safer streets mission aims to halve knife crime and violence against women and girls and to restore confidence in the criminal justice system. The Young Futures programme will divert young people from a life of crime and the neighbourhood policing guarantee will deliver an additional 13,000 neighbourhood policing roles.

Adam Jogee: Can I say how excellent it is to see the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), in her place on the Front Bench? I have heard concerns from many constituents in recent days about the grooming of young people, particularly young women, and those are concerns that all of us in this House clearly share. Given that only 6.9% of violent or sexual crimes in the west midlands were solved in the year ending June 2024, what steps are being taken to hold the thugs to account and to protect young people, particularly young women and girls in Newcastle-under-Lyme, so that they can live their lives safely?

Dame Diana Johnson: I echo my hon. Friend's comments about my hon. Friend the Safeguarding Minister. On the point he raises, there is an interesting article in the papers today where the Minister is quoted as saying:

"It is completely unacceptable that fewer and fewer violent and sexual crimes are being solved, with more victims being let down time and time again."

I cannot think of a better champion to take forward the work to protect young women in particular than the Safeguarding Minister.

Mr Speaker: There will be wizardry in the way this question from Sir Julian is delivered.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Does the Minister accept that it would greatly assist the police to investigate crime in Newcastle-under-Lyme, and indeed elsewhere, if they were not spending an estimated 60,000 hours investigating and recording so-called non-crime hate incidents?

Dame Diana Johnson: The Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and I, as the Policing Minister, have said that we want a common-sense approach to dealing with these matters. The Government have been very clear on this. We have set out our priorities as the incoming Government: halving knife crime; halving violence against women and girls; restoring confidence in the justice system; and—one of the big issues for me—tackling antisocial behaviour through our neighbourhood policing guarantee.

Knife Crime

9. **Joani Reid** (East Kilbride and Strathaven) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle knife crime. [902111]

22. **Yuan Yang** (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle knife crime. [902124]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): We remember those who have lost their lives to knife crime, including 17-year-old Thomas Taylor, killed in Bedford, and 14-year-old Kelyan Bokassa, killed in Woolwich just last week. Kelyan's mother said: "I tried to prevent it. I've tried so many, so many times."

No mother should live with that grief or feel that level of fear for her teenage son. That is why this Government have set up the coalition to tackle knife crime, which involves families, alongside taking new action on serious violence.

Joani Reid: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer, and of course my sympathies also go out to that mother this weekend. Recently published data showed a sharp rise in serious violent crime in Scotland, particularly in our cities and towns. Too many of my constituents feel unsafe in East Kilbride town centre and the Village, particularly at night. Meanwhile, the SNP Government's chronic underfunding of Police Scotland has resulted in officer numbers being at their lowest level since 2008. Does the Secretary of State agree that the SNP now has the funding in place to increase police numbers, and that protecting our community and citizens should be its priority?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to say that the Scottish Government have a significant increase in funding, so they can take action to improve public services. This Government have made it a mission to halve knife crime over the next decade, including taking action to get dangerous weapons, such as zombie knives and ninja swords, off our streets by preventing the unlawful sale of these lethal blades, particularly to children.

Yuan Yang: My constituents in Whitley had their Christmas disrupted by an alarming threat of knife crime. We have seen too many tragedies of this kind in Reading over the last few years, so I wholeheartedly welcome the Government's mission to halve knife crime. I have applied for my Earley and Woodley constituency to be a trial location for the new respect orders. Will the Home Secretary meet me and my constituents to discuss how we can tackle the root problems that cause people, particularly young people, to carry knives?

Yvette Cooper: The Policing Minister and I will happily talk further to my hon. Friend. She is right that we need to prevent young people from obtaining and carrying knives in the first place, as well as making sure there is swift intervention. We are also taking action, working with police forces across the country, to tackle knife-enabled robbery, which is one of the areas that has seen the biggest increases in recent years.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Home Secretary for her response. Over the past five years, there have been 900 convictions for knife-related crimes in Northern Ireland. There is an epidemic in Northern Ireland, with almost 200 convictions in the last year alone. What discussions has the Home Secretary had with the relevant authorities, including the Police Service of Northern Ireland, to help us address this issue?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member will know that the PSNI takes this issue extremely seriously. The issues of knife crime are devastating to families, and he is right to be deeply concerned about the increases we have seen. Frankly, it is still far too easy for young people to get hold of knives. That is why we asked Commander Stephen Clayman to conduct a detailed review of the online sale and delivery of knives, and we expect his report back shortly.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): A nurse was stabbed in an emergency department in Oldham over the weekend. Will the Home Secretary join me in condemning any attack on our health and social care workers, and especially the one at the weekend?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member makes an extremely important point. Our public servants, particularly our nursing and medical staff, work to save lives, support people and help patients. They do so trusting that the people who come to see them are asking for their help. He is right to talk about the devastating attack at the Oldham hospital, and we are all thinking about the nurse and all those working in the hospital, as well as about the police investigation that I know is under way.

Antisocial Behaviour

10. **Rosie Duffield** (Canterbury) (Ind): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle antisocial behaviour. [902112]

24. **Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): What recent progress her Department has made on improving neighbourhood policing to tackle antisocial behaviour. [902126]

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): The Government are committed to tackling antisocial behaviour and the harm and misery that we all know it causes in communities. This is part of our safer streets mission that will introduce respect orders and put 13,000 additional police officers, PCSOs and special constables into neighbourhood policing roles so that each community has a visible presence and an accountable police team.

Rosie Duffield: Last year, on average, at least three instances of antisocial behaviour per day were reported to Kent police in the city centre of Canterbury alone. We have great beat officers who I know keep our city as safe as they can, but given that the economy of our historic UNESCO city relies so heavily on tourism, how will the Government work with Kent police to further tackle this issue so that residents, businesses and visitors feel safer?

Dame Diana Johnson: The hon. Lady makes an important point about how antisocial behaviour has to be tackled, particularly in areas where we have lots of tourists. The neighbourhood policing guarantee is important because it will deliver an additional 13,000 police officers, PCSOs and specials in our town and city centres and in rural areas by the end of this Parliament. In the provisional policing settlement, announced just before Christmas, there is £100 million to start the recruitment of the 13,000 police officers.

Neil Coyle: How will the Minister ensure that the safer streets mission is delivered in communities like mine in Southwark, where too often officers are extracted to police protests and the Met is divided between its neighbourhood and national policing roles?

Dame Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the conflicting and competing interests in the Metropolitan police. We have committed to putting police back on the beat through the neighbourhood policing guarantee. A neighbourhood policing team will be in every area. It will be out policing, with intelligence-led, visible patrols, and will ensure officers are protected from being deployed elsewhere. That is part of the guarantee.

Asylum Hotels

13. **Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): What progress her Department has made on closing asylum hotels. [902115]

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Dame Angela Eagle): The Government are committed to reducing hotel use through reform of the asylum system, including through streamlining asylum processing and establishing the Border Security Command to tackle people smuggling gangs at source. Since the general election, there has been a net increase of six hotels in use, but nine are scheduled for closure by the end of March.

Sir Ashley Fox: The Government's new policy of smashing the gangs has enabled them to close seven asylum hotels, but unfortunately they have had to open another 14. Will the Minister tell us when the number of asylum seekers in hotel accommodation will be lower than when she took office?

Dame Angela Eagle: Because of the size of the backlog we inherited from the Conservative party and an asylum system in chaos, with tens of thousands of people in limbo and very little processing happening, the problem cannot be solved overnight. However, we are working very hard to close hotels. I just gave the hon. Gentleman the figures: nine more hotels are scheduled to close by the end of March, and there has been a net increase of six, so by the end March there will be fewer.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): The previous Government wasted a scandalous amount of public money on asylum accommodation. For example, in Northeye, they paid double what the previous owners had paid, without checking that the building did not have asbestos and contaminated ground, and it could not be used. Will the Minister commit to being more effective in providing value for public money, to ensure that taxpayers' money is not wasted as we fix the asylum backlog?

Dame Angela Eagle: I certainly will. We should also remember the £60 million the Conservative party wasted on RAF Scampton and the £15 million on a derelict, asbestos-ridden former prison in Bexhill. We will not take any lessons from Conservative Members about value for money in Government expenditure.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): In the royal town of Sutton Coldfield, we understand that we must do our bit to help house asylum seekers, but the Ramada hotel on Penns Lane has always been the wrong place because it is too far away from inner-city Birmingham-based services. Under the last Government, the facility was slated for closure, so will the Minister look urgently at winding it down and closing it as soon as possible?

Dame Angela Eagle: It is our intention to close all asylum hotels as soon as possible, once we deal with the backlog that we inherited from the Conservative party.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Asylum accommodation hotels were once emergency measures but have now lasted several years because of the mess the Tories made of our asylum system. Scrapping the Rwanda scheme and recommencing the processing of claims has led to a substantially lower backlog than we would have had if we had continued with the Tory policies, but there is still much more to do. Will the Minister update the House on progress towards ending asylum hotel accommodation and cutting waiting times for asylum application decisions?

Dame Angela Eagle: We inherited a system where very few decisions were being made. We have ramped up decision making to over 11,000 decisions a month and we are dealing with the backlog, but backlogs cannot be abolished overnight, and there are also appeals backlogs. We inherited a huge mess, but we are methodically getting through it.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): Housing asylum seekers in hotels—of which there were 6,000 more cases in just the first three months of this Government—is spectacularly expensive. The Home Secretary's policy is

to make asylum decisions quickly, so that any costs of the migrants she accepts can be hidden in the welfare system. The Home Office admits in its impact assessments that it has no idea how much her policy will cost in benefits claims and council housing bills. Will the Minister commit today to recording and publishing all those costs for migrants whose asylum claims she accepts?

Dame Angela Eagle: I will take no lessons from the Conservative party, which spent £700 million to send four volunteers to Rwanda and left huge backlogs of more than 90,000 stopped asylum claims—people in hotels, unable to leave because the Conservatives were trying to get their fantasy Rwanda programme off the ground.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): My constituent Majida and her three children are asylum seekers from Syria, living in one of the two asylum hotels in my Hazel Grove constituency. They have been living in limbo for nine months as they wait for a decision on their asylum claim. Like all Syrian asylum seekers, their applications have been temporarily paused following the fall of Assad. Many in my community are keen to support those seeking asylum, but also very keen to see an end to the use of hotels. The cost of housing families in that way is too high, both to the mental wellbeing of those living there and to the taxpayer. What circumstances is the Minister waiting for to resume decision making on asylum applications from Syrians, and when does she expect that to happen?

Dame Angela Eagle: The fall of the Assad regime was a welcome development, given that he was a tyrant, but 5,500 Syrian asylum seekers are currently in our system, many of whom fled the Assad regime. Until Syria's future becomes a little more settled, it is difficult to decide those claims, which is why both this country and most of Europe have had a temporary pause while the situation in Syria settles and develops. I cannot tell the hon. Lady exactly when decision making will resume. All I can say is that we are keeping the matter under close observation. As soon as there is any development in this area, we will ensure that the House knows about it.

Windrush: Victim Support

15. **Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab):** What steps her Department is taking to support victims of the Windrush scandal. [902117]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra): This Labour Government are determined to put right the appalling injustice suffered by members of the Windrush community. We will ensure that those affected receive the compensation they deserve, and that cultural change is embedded permanently in the Home Office. At the end of November 2024, over £100 million has been paid to individuals across almost 3,000 claims under the Windrush compensation scheme. We have also re-established the Windrush unit to drive forward the action needed to ensure that what happened to the Windrush generation never happens again.

Harpreet Uppal: Members of the Windrush generation who struggle to submit compensation claims do not have access to legal aid, leaving them unable to navigate the complex process. I have recently been contacted by a constituent who is struggling to navigate the claims process, and has no other support available to him. What steps is the Minister taking to tackle those barriers, and will she commit to providing additional support to ensure that every eligible individual can access the scheme, regardless of their capacity or circumstances?

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We are committed to making changes so that the scheme is accessible and so victims of the Windrush scandal are far better supported in applying for compensation. It is why, in July, we brought in a single named caseworker approach to streamline the process, improve consistency and remove duplication, and it is why we announced £1.5 million of grant funding for organisations to provide extra support for applicants. If she would like to meet to discuss her constituent's case further, I would be happy to do so.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): The Windrush scandal involved people coming to this country in good faith who were then falsely labelled as illegal immigrants. One thing that the Minister could do to avoid such circumstances happening again is make it easier for people to come here through a reduction in the English language requirement. Is that something that she would consider?

Seema Malhotra: Our priority is to understand and learn from the events in the past and focus on the future by ensuring that the Department is inclusive and considers the impact of all its work on people from every background.

Migration Levels: Indefinite Leave to Remain

16. **Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con):** What estimate her Department has made of the potential impact of levels of net migration on future trends in the number of people who will be granted indefinite leave to remain. [902118]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra): The Government are committed to bringing down net migration after it hit record highs under the last Government. We will do that by taking a different approach, linking skills and migration policy so that immigration is not used as an alternative to tackling workforce problems in the UK. The Home Office publishes migrant journey analysis, which shows the proportion of migrants granted indefinite leave to remain over time, helping to inform on who might seek to remain in the UK in the long term.

Jack Rankin: The mass import of low-skilled workers could cost the taxpayer more than £61 billion—a financial ticking time bomb. Will the Minister commit here and now to extending the qualifying period for indefinite leave to remain or bringing in new qualifying criteria?

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Gentleman would do well to hold his own side to account for their record on net migration. The Government recognise and value the contribution that legal migration makes to our country.

There is always a place for overseas recruitment for firms looking to grow, but it must not be the first port of call, and we must ensure that our migration system is controlled, managed and fair.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Since the Government came to office, 23,000 illegal migrants have crossed the English channel—an increase of 29% compared with the same time last year. Do the Government now accept the National Crime Agency's advice that a deterrent like the Rwanda scheme, which they cancelled before it even started, is needed? Last week, the Government were trumpeting their removals figures. Will they honestly accept that only a tiny fraction of removals relate to people who arrived by small boat? In fact, in their first three months, the removals amounted to only 5% of people who entered the UK by small boat. Will the Minister accept that allowing 95% of small boat arrivals to stay is no deterrent at all?

Seema Malhotra: The shadow Home Secretary appears to have forgotten what happened when he was in Government. In fact, he will know that for the first six months of last year the numbers of those arriving on small boats was the highest for any six months on record. He will know that the previous Government spent over £700 million on a failed Rwanda scheme that saw four volunteers go to Rwanda. I will not take any lessons from the shadow Home Secretary. The Conservatives should take responsibility for their record and apologise for it.

Topical Questions

T1. [902128] **Gill Furniss** (Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): Immigration asylum rules need to be respected and enforced, and for too long that has not happened. Since the general election, we have ramped up removals for those who have no right to be in the United Kingdom, with 16,400 individuals successfully returned in the first six months of this Government—the highest level of returns over a six-month period since 2018. Wider work to strengthen border security is under way, including the new sanctions regime announced by the Foreign Secretary to target smuggling gangs and new co-operation agreements, including with France, Germany, Italy, Iraq and beyond. Because vile criminal smuggler gangs operate across borders, law enforcement needs to co-operate across borders, too, to bring them down.

Gill Furniss: Knife crime continues to have a devastating impact on all too many lives in Sheffield. I recently chaired a roundtable in my constituency, which brought together local leaders, police, schools and voluntary organisations that are all on the frontline. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is vital to work together with key stakeholders so that we can build a collaborative approach to ending knife crime once and for all?

Yvette Cooper: I agree with my hon. Friend. That is why we have set up the coalition to tackle knife crime. It is also why we have a knife-enabled robbery taskforce working with chief constables. At local level, we have discussed setting out prevention partnerships—part of the Young Futures programme—so that all organisations can come together and be part of a mission to halve knife crime over the next 10 years.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I know that the thoughts of the whole House will be with the victims of the grooming and rape gangs. Will the Home Secretary agree with the Labour Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham and the hon. Member for Liverpool Walton (Dan Carden)—a Labour MP—that we need a proper national public inquiry?

The independent inquiry into child sexual abuse report touched only on grooming gangs and covered only six of the towns affected. Local inquiries such as the Manchester one that the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister referred to do not have the legal powers to compel the production of evidence, which is why the Manchester chairs resigned. One Oldham victim, Jane, who was groomed and gang-raped at the age of 12, has called for a full national inquiry—

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Philp, this is topicals. You could have got this in earlier with a lengthier question. The first part of your question was absolutely accurate, but you cannot just roll on at topicals or nobody else will get in.

Yvette Cooper: These are horrendous crimes involving rape, sadistic violence and cruelty, exploitation, intimidation and coercion, so we need action, truth and accountability for those terrible crimes. That is why we support further investigations, inquiries and action into child sexual exploitation and grooming gangs, including new action to get police reporting evidence on the scale of grooming gangs, including on ethnicity, which has still not been done. The most important thing is to get more police investigations to get these criminals behind bars.

Chris Philp: Does the Home Secretary agree that it is untenable for the Government's own anti-corruption Minister to be under investigation for benefiting from the proceeds of corruption? Should she stand down while the investigation continues?

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Member will know that the Minister has referred herself to the ministerial standards adviser, and that is the appropriate way for this to be addressed. More broadly, we take seriously the full range of crimes that our country faces and will continue to work closely with the police always to take action against crime.

T3. [902130] **Sarah Coombes** (West Bromwich) (Lab): With a rise in disinformation and intimidation at home and interference from abroad, it has never been more important to stand up for our British democracy. Will the Minister therefore give us an update on the defending democracy taskforce?

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): It is a top priority to protect our country and our elected representatives from interference, intimidation and harassment. The defending democracy taskforce brings together a cross-Government response to these threats. We will use all the tools at our disposal to protect our democratic security and resilience.

T2. [902129] **Pete Wishart** (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Last week, the Scottish Parliament passed a motion calling for action on immigration to address the needs of Scotland's employers, communities and public services, with a particular reference to rural visa pilots. As the Secretary of State knows, every sector in Scotland is crying out for Scottish solutions to distinct Scottish issues and problems. What is her response to that democratically passed motion other than not being interested?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra): I will shortly be visiting Scotland to discuss these issues. The hon. Member will know that we will not be introducing a Scottish visa scheme or devolving control of immigration policy. He will also know that the Migration Advisory Committee has found that labour market needs are similar across the UK. It continues to engage at length with many UK stakeholders, including from Scotland.

T6. [902133] **Tom Rutland** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): The brilliant Adur Ukraine Support Association has raised concerns with me that the 18-month limit on the extension of Ukrainians' permission to remain in the UK is causing issues in securing tenancies, jobs and undergraduate university courses, which last for a minimum of three years. Will the Minister meet me to discuss that issue facing Ukrainians in my constituency?

Seema Malhotra: The UK's support for Ukraine remains steadfast. The scheme will provide an additional 18 months' temporary permission to Ukrainians here under one of the existing Ukraine schemes. When a person's Ukraine scheme leave expires during their course and they are granted further leave to remain—for example, on a student visa—they will continue to be able to complete their studies. I will be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that further.

T5. [902132] **Edward Morello** (West Dorset) (LD): Dorset police operates across more than 1,000 square miles, yet under the current funding settlement it receives far less money than urban areas with similar crime rates operating over smaller geographies. Will the Government commit to reviewing the funding settlement to ensure that rural areas such as West Dorset get a fairer settlement?

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): Of course, the hon. Gentleman's force area is getting more money in the settlement that was announced just before Christmas. Clearly, we keep all formulas under consideration and, as the hon. Gentleman knows, we are going to go through a police reform package and programme. Finance will be part of that.

T8. [902135] **Rachel Taylor** (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): Under the last Government, my constituents had completely lost faith that foreign national offenders with no right to remain in this country would

be swiftly removed. I am glad that, since the last election, our new Labour Government have enforced the return of over 2,500 foreign criminals, including serious and violent offenders—a 23% increase since last year. Can the Minister reassure my constituents that this Government will not be taking their foot off the gas and will continue taking strong action?

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Dame Angela Eagle):

Yes. Foreign nationals who commit offences and are sentenced to 12 months in prison have no right to be here, and I can assure my hon. Friend that we will work tirelessly to ensure that they can be removed. The 23% increase in six months is a good start, but we will not take our foot off the gas.

T7. [902134] **Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): In my Oxfordshire constituency, residents are concerned about increased antisocial behaviour, particularly pickpocketing and shoplifting in our towns. Given that the last Conservative Government cut the number of police community support officers in the Thames valley area by more than half since 2015, what steps will the Minister be taking to ensure that the police are able to improve community policing in Oxfordshire towns such as Wallingford, Wantage and Didcot?

Yvette Cooper: We want to see an increase in neighbourhood policing right across the country. That is why we set out £100 million as part of the police settlement for next year to kick-start and increase recruitment of neighbourhood police officers and PCSOs, alongside stronger powers to tackle neighbourhood crime.

T10. [902137] **Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): I welcome the Government's plans to tackle youth violence, but also to prioritise early intervention. In Battersea, brilliant organisations such as Carney's Community are delivering targeted services to young people—from mentoring and life skills, to boxing and fitness. Does the Minister agree that organisations such as Carney's need our support? Will she agree to visit it so that she can hear at first hand about its approach to tackling youth violence?

Dame Diana Johnson: I would be delighted to visit.

T9. [902136] **Sarah Bool** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Does the Secretary of State believe it is fair that undocumented illegal migrants get priority access to the NHS over British taxpayers?

Dame Angela Eagle: They do not.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): Since October 2023, my constituent has been separated from her husband and the father of her children, who is a Palestinian citizen of the state of Israel. I have deep concerns about the Home Office's handling of this case, and it has not replied to my last two representations. Will the Minister agree to look into this case?

Seema Malhotra: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that case, and I am very happy to meet him to discuss the issues he has raised.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Penselwood in Glastonbury and Somerton is regularly blighted by unlicensed music events, leaving residents feeling frightened and vulnerable, as organisers pay scant regard to them or to the police. How will the Minister support the police to give the public confidence that they will crack down on these illegal raves?

Dame Diana Johnson: If the hon. Lady writes to me with details, I will certainly look into that issue.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Recently, the owner of social media site X has used his sizeable platform to undermine the democratic result of last July's general election; has stirred up hatred towards my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), putting her safety at risk; and has sought mechanisms to depose the Prime Minister. Can the Minister say what actions the Defending Democracy Taskforce is taking to prevent this kind of foreign interference in British politics?

Dan Jarvis: I thank my hon. Friend for that important question. The Government consider this work to be urgent. We have seen some utterly unacceptable activity, both during and beyond the general election. I hope that work to address this issue will be a shared endeavour right across the House, but the Government are working at pace to address it.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): What actions will the Home Secretary be taking following the news that eight UK companies and organisations have been deemed terror groups by the United Arab Emirates?

Dan Jarvis: The UAE is an important international partner for the UK, but of course other countries have their own rules on designation and it would not be appropriate for the Government to comment on their processes. I can say to the hon. Member that extremism has no place in our society and that we work very closely with law enforcement, local communities and our international partners to tackle groups and any individuals who seek to sow division and hatred.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): My deepest condolences go to the family and friends of 17-year-old Thomas Taylor, who was fatally stabbed in Bedford last week. Bedfordshire has some of the highest knife crime rates in the country. While I welcome the increased funding for the force and the progress made on tackling knife crime in the region, will the Secretary of State ensure that the special grants awarded to Bedfordshire police in recognition of the high level of serious and violent crimes in the region are maintained? Will she outline what further steps are being taken to deter young people from carrying lethal weapons?

Yvette Cooper: I think the thoughts of all of us will be with the family and friends of Thomas Taylor, who was a constituent of my hon. Friend. He is right to say that we need comprehensive work to prevent knife crime and to prevent young people from carrying knives in the first place, but also to make sure that there is swift action where crimes take place.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The National Crime Agency estimates that £100 billion of illicit funds flow through the UK yearly. Despite the existence of the David Cameron-created unexplained wealth orders, only 11 orders in total have ever been issued, relating to four or five cases. What is my right hon. Friend doing to stop these orders from becoming pointless, as they were under the Tories, because we cannot afford to use them?

Dan Jarvis: Among many other things, the Government have appointed Baroness Hodge as the Government's anti-corruption champion. We will be working very closely with her and other ministerial colleagues to address the issue that my hon. Friend has raised.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): Can the Home Secretary confirm that none of her Ministers or officials engages with or is in touch with the Muslim Council of Britain, and that there is no correspondence between No. 10, the Home Office and other Departments about restoring ties with the organisation?

Dan Jarvis: Yes, we can confirm that that is the case.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Several of my constituents in South Oxhey have unfortunately been the victims of burglary or attempted burglary. Will the Home Secretary outline the measures her Department is taking to allow the police to invest in technologies such as live facial recognition, which can make crimes such as burglary easier to solve?

Dame Diana Johnson: We are currently looking into whether there is a need for more regulation of live facial recognition, but I recognise that it is a very important tool to which the police should have access. I am having a series of stakeholder meetings with various groups to discuss how we take this forward, but I do recognise how important the technology is and how it can be a really positive way of identifying people and solving crimes.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): Can I place on the record my thanks to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), who I know will ensure that this Government do more to tackle violence against women and girls than any other Government? In doing so, will the Government amend the strategy to consider prostitution and other forms of commercial sexual exploitation as violence against women and girls?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): I thank my hon. Friend for her kind comments about me. The violence against women and girls strategy that the Government will launch later this year will absolutely root out adult sexual exploitation, which so often actually stems from childhood sexual exploitation, into the Government's violence against women and girls strategy—for the first time ever.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Is the Home Secretary aware of the growing link, as highlighted by a recent Durham University report, between rural crime

and serious organised crime? If not, could she ask her officials to bring it to her attention? Given the transnational element to this serious organised crime, could the National Crime Agency start to take a closer look at rural crime?

Yvette Cooper: I am aware of this, and I think there is a very serious issue about how serious and organised crime has increasingly been targeting rural areas and

things such as the GPS equipment used by farmers. The point about those involved in serious and organised crime is that they will always target areas where they think they can get away with it. That is why the issue is partly about the work of the National Crime Agency, but also about the work of police forces across the country and the work we need to do to take forward a rural crime strategy with the National Police Chiefs' Council.

Gas Storage Levels

3.40 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero if he will make a statement on gas storage levels.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): Energy security is a key priority for this Government, and at no time was there any concern about Britain's energy system being able to meet demand. Our systems worked entirely as intended. We had capacity to deal with market constraints, and that has been backed up by the two authoritative voices on this issue in the country—National Gas, which runs the gas network, and the National Energy System Operator.

We have sufficient gas supply and electricity capacity to meet demand this winter, due to our diverse and resilient system. While storage is an important flexibility tool in the gas system, our varied sources of gas supply mean that the UK is less reliant on storage than some other European countries that have a more limited supply options. Our diverse options include the UK continental shelf, our long-term energy partner Norway, international markets via the second largest liquefied natural gas onshoring capacity in Europe, and two interconnectors.

Gas storage is used throughout the year, but typically operates in winter to help meet peaks in demand. Through colder spells, storage levels are expected to fluctuate across the winter period. That is what happened last week following the severe cold weather, and it is a sign that the gas and storage markets are working exactly as they should. That is precisely why we have those systems in place. In their winter outlooks, National Gas and the National Energy System Operator assessed that there is sufficient supply to meet winter demand, including the role of storage. On Friday, National Gas, the owner and operator of Britain's gas networks, confirmed that

"the overall picture across Great Britain's eight gas storage sites remains healthy."

We will continue to work closely with National Gas, NESO and storage operators to maintain continued security of supply. I reiterate: Britain's energy system is working to continue to meet the demand of consumers across the country.

Andrew Bowie: All our constituents will be aware of the freezing temperatures experienced across the United Kingdom last week, dipping to minus 18° in the north of Scotland. However, many will not be aware of just how close this country came to an energy shortage, blackouts, or demand control—closer than at any point in the past 15 years. On Friday Centrica, the owner of British Gas, issued a stark warning that freezing weather and a spike in demand had reduced our gas storage to "concerningly low" levels—26% lower than this time last year. At a time when temperatures dropped below freezing for an extended period of time, our stores were set to last for less than a week.

Earlier in the week the National Energy System Operator issued a call for electricity providers to step in to provide extra electricity to meet demand and limit the risk of

blackouts, paying 10 times the average daily amount to keep the lights on, all of which will end up on the energy bills of our constituents. With an incredibly tight margin between demand and available power generation, we were once again forced to rely on reliable gas power plants to keep the lights on in this country, showing that gas is and will be a vital component of our energy security for decades to come.

With their rush to meet the Secretary of State's ideological target to decarbonise the entire electricity grid by 2030, this Government are playing fast and loose with our ability to keep the lights on. They are rushing headlong into a renewable energy dominated system—a Chinese renewable energy dominated system—but Ministers cannot escape the fact that when the wind does not blow and the sun does not shine, wind turbines and solar panels will not keep the lights on in Britain. We should be in no doubt that this Government's ideological plans for our energy supply will leave the UK dependent on foreign imports, send bills soaring, and leave us teetering on the brink of blackouts.

Interestingly, when Labour was last in government in 2010, the Secretary of State whipped his then Ministers to vote against Conservative proposals to increase gas storage capacity in the United Kingdom, with a Labour MP on the Energy Bill Committee saying that

"the climate of this country, other than in the past month, is usually such that we do not quite need the same storage facilities as other countries in mainland Europe?"—[*Official Report, Energy Public Bill Committee*, 19 January 2010; c. 282.]

Does the Minister think the Secretary of State regrets not backing that proposal in 2010? Does he accept that the push towards renewables will lead to higher levels of intermittency, and does he accept that we will need to urgently review our gas storage capacity in the immediate future?

Michael Shanks: The shadow Minister's point would be well made were it not for the fact that it is completely untrue. If we look at the facts, the capacity market notice that he mentions was cancelled—

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has made a direct hint that what the Member said was untrue. Is he sure of that, or does he want to rephrase it?

Michael Shanks: I apologise, Mr Speaker; I think the shadow Minister was confused in the facts that he gave to Parliament today. I am happy to set that right.

Let us look at the facts. The National Energy System Operator—the people who run the system—stated clearly:

"At no point were electricity supplies less than anticipated demand and our engineers were able to rebalance the system without the need to consider any emergency measures."

If we listen to the experts—to National Gas and to NESO—they both confirmed over the weekend that there was resilience in the system. I reiterate the point that the system operated exactly as it was intended to do.

If the shadow Minister has complaints about how the system operates in the country and the gas storage situation, he may want to look at some of his colleagues who were in power over the past 14 years. He knows the truth about his party's record. He is a very smart guy, and he knows they left us exposed. He knows they did not do enough to build the system that we need and he

[Michael Shanks]

knows what caused the worst cost of living crisis in living memory. While his party is busy crowdsourcing policy advice on Twitter from net zero sceptics, it would be far better if they looked at their own record in government and, instead of criticising us, recognised that we are getting on with building a resilient energy system for the future.

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

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The shadow Minister missed from his story the role of Liz Truss. When she was the Chief Secretary to the Treasury in 2017, she made the decision to close our gas storage facility. Does the Minister agree that if we want energy security and lower prices, that all depends on reducing our reliance on the volatile nature of the international fossil fuel market? Does that not mean that his clean power action plan for 2030 is exactly the right policy to address the events of the past few days?

Michael Shanks: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The decisions that the previous Government took on storage are for them to answer, and anyone who looks at their record will rightly raise questions about that. On the broader point, he is right. The only plan for how we can get off the volatile fossil fuel markets, to which the previous Government left us far too exposed, is the clean power action plan that we have announced. If the Tories oppose that, they need to come up with their alternative to deliver the resilience in the system that we are fighting for every single day.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) is right to raise this important question about energy security. Gas supplies are running low because of the unexpected cold snap over the past two weeks. While those who can afford it have continued to use gas, the energy crisis has left energy prices skyrocketing and energy bills spiralling, with many having to make the decision between putting food on the table or staying warm. That is the case for too many families in my constituency of South Cambridgeshire.

The shadow Minister accused the Government of playing fast and loose, but it is due to the decisions of the last Conservative Government that we find ourselves in this mess, with their reckless dither and delay over insulation and decarbonising our homes and the irresponsible decision around our gas storage capacity. This is about overreliance on gas. For too long—

Mr Speaker: Order. You are over time, so I am sure you are coming to the end.

Pippa Heylings: I am. What steps are the Government taking to reduce overreliance on gas by bringing in an emergency home upgrade scheme that will enable people to insulate and to keep their homes warm with heat pumps this winter, rather than waiting until spring?

Mr Speaker: I think the Minister has got the point.

Michael Shanks: The hon. Lady is right; this is an incredibly important issue that gets to the heart of the fact we inherited from the previous Government not

just an economic mess but a series of policy decisions not made, and an energy system that needed us to take serious decisions quickly to build resilience for the future.

On the broader point about consumers, she will know that my hon. Friend the Minister for consumers is doing a lot of work on exactly what the warmer homes scheme will look like, to ensure that people have as warm a home as possible. She is right that at times such as this, the people in the poorest households struggle the most. We are doing what we can to ensure that homes are insulated and, in the long term, to bring down bills. The only way to do that is to deliver clean power by 2030—faster than the previous Government would ever have managed.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): The shadow Minister comes to the House with no shame. As has been referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson), the shadow Minister's party closed Rough in 2017, leaving us exposed. I commend the Minister on taking urgent steps through our clean power mission to secure our energy system, and I urge him to ignore the political distractions of the Conservative party.

Michael Shanks: My hon. Friend is right that this Government are moving as fast as possible to build a more resilient system to get the country off the rollercoaster of volatile fossil fuel markets. The Conservatives seem to oppose that, but they have been on something of a journey in all these questions: they used to champion net zero and recognise that climate change was a clear and present danger to the world, but now they are drifting further away from that, looking for more extremist views on Twitter and elsewhere to crowdsource their policy. We are getting on with building the energy system to bring down bills, deliver energy security and, yes, to deliver climate leadership.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): The National Electricity System Operator issued a warning of a 1,700 MW shortfall at the evening peak. It revised that down to barely more than 1,200, and it was running at one point with only 580 MW of margin. How are the Government so complacent about this? It is astonishing. As someone who has followed the energy debate for the past 30 years or so, I warn the Minister that this is almost unprecedented. For him to say that everything is absolutely fine is incredibly irresponsible, when his own Government's policies are contributing to the tightness of the generating margin. If the lights go out, will he resign?

Michael Shanks: That is the kind of extremist scaremongering that we have come to expect from the shadow Secretary of State on Twitter, but we are now hearing it in the House. It is thoroughly irresponsible to use such language. In my answer, I read the very clear view of the National Energy System Operator, which runs the system and is the expert. I repeat it for the benefit of the House:

“At no point were electricity supplies less than anticipated demand and our engineers were able to rebalance the system without the need to consider emergency measures.”

The shadow Minister and Back-Bench MPs can repeat the phrasing around blackouts all they like, but at no point was that a concern. The reality is that while the

Conservatives are happy to throw around such phrases without any evidence, we are building the resilient system of the future, and we will get on with doing that.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): In government, the Conservatives saw the closure of Rough and reduced gas storage. In opposition, they oppose our proposals for clean power, and would see this country more reliant on volatile gas markets and higher energy prices. Is it not the truth that the Conservatives want us more reliant on gas, with higher bills and more likelihood of blackouts, because they oppose our plans for clean power and tackling runaway and accelerating climate change?

Michael Shanks: The decision on whether to run gas storage sites is a commercial one for Centrica. The storage site at Rough was closed between 2017 and 2022—hon. Members may remember that that was when the “beast from the east” was attacking the country. The previous Government will have to answer for the decisions that they made on that. We are making it clear that the only way to build the energy system that we need in the long term is the clean power action plan. The Conservatives used to support much of that but, increasingly, they have decided to walk away from it. They will either keep us attached to the volatile fossil fuel markets, with all the price spikes that our constituents continue to pay the price of, or they will have to come up with an alternative plan. We are getting on with doing the work.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Can I encourage the Minister to come out of combat mode for a second and consider a constructive proposal? If we are not to become re-dependent on gas when the wind does not blow and the sun does not shine, and we do not want to be dependent on foreign countries indefinitely, can he see a future role for modular nuclear reactors?

Michael Shanks: If I am in any kind of attack mode, it is because the Opposition do not seem to be dealing with reality, and I think it is important to correct that. The right hon. Gentleman is right that the future energy mix, as we outlined in the clean power action plan, will involve a range of technologies. We outlined the range we would expect for each of those, and nuclear—in particular small modular reactors—will play an incredibly important part in that. We are moving forward with the programme we inherited from the previous Government, which was yet another incomplete process. We will make it happen as quickly as possible, and SMRs will play a key role in our energy mix.

Derek Twigg (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): Following on from a previous question, clearly, the previous Government did delay investing in and starting up more nuclear power opportunities and options. What progress has been made since this Government came into power on plans to take forward nuclear power as part of our supply?

Hon. Members: When?

Michael Shanks: Conservative Members ask, “When?”—they had 14 years in power, and in 14 years did not build a single new nuclear project. The former Minister for nuclear, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire

and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), loves to shout about all the consultations that he launched, but he did not build a single new nuclear power station.

My hon. Friend is right to make the point that we should move forward with nuclear—we want to see nuclear projects move forward as quickly as possible. My hon. Friend the Minister for nuclear is moving forward with two of the biggest projects, as well as the small modular reactor competition. We are quite rightly going through a process to ensure that it is as robust as possible, but we will have more to say in due course.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Last Friday, I met Wales & West Utilities, which runs the gas grid in my constituency and beyond, where I heard that hydrogen is still a very viable option for home heating. Although there have been a number of pilots, the Government have recently gone quite quiet on hydrogen in home heating. Will the Minister update us on the steps he is taking to progress hydrogen for home heating?

Michael Shanks: The hon. Lady raises the potential of hydrogen in our energy mix. Of course, one of the real strengths of the gas network is that it can be changed into other things in the future; that is a real strength of what we have, and we are looking at what those options might be. There is a mix of options available with hydrogen, including home heating, but it could still play a really key role in industrial projects, for example, in the shorter term. We are looking at those projects. We need to ensure that it is financially viable and that we have worked out all the technological details on how we would make it happen. We will have more to say on that in due course.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): My understanding is that these notices are issued at times of high demand, and that they are evidence of the system working in order to prevent power cuts or the system breaking down. I would have thought the Conservatives would have learned their lesson from the spike in international gas prices that caused the crisis in people’s fuel bills and led to a cost of living crisis, but they have learned nothing from that. Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that this really underlines our policy of ensuring that we have a secure provision of renewable energy, which leaves us less open to spikes in prices on the international market?

Michael Shanks: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is worth saying that electricity margin notices are not unexpected, particularly at this time of year. They mean that there is enough generation available to meet demand, but that NESO would like to see a larger safety cushion; that is the important point for people to understand what margin notices are about. The notice was cancelled, of course, because there was sufficient supply to ensure that cushion.

My hon. Friend’s broader point is important. We have outlined in great detail how we will deliver clean power by 2030. The Conservatives now claim to oppose that; in fact, they oppose much of net zero full stop. They will have to answer how they would deliver a secure and resilient energy system of the future that brings down bills and delivers on climate leadership.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): I am unconvinced, to use parliamentary language, by the Minister's reassurance that the lights did not almost go out last week. I am also unconvinced by his saying that the system is robust and resilient. This is the Minister who told electors in Scotland that energy bills would come down by £300 under this Government. They have gone up, and will go up twice more. Given the perilous gas storage situation—it is at 1%, compared to the 25% the EU enjoys—what steps will he take to de-stress the system by accelerating investment in long-duration energy storage?

Michael Shanks: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his characteristic question. On the first point, let me just say that it was not I who said anything about what the margins were. I quoted the National Energy System Operator, which actually delivers in this country—and will quote it again for the benefit of the hon. Gentleman:

“At no point were electricity supplies less than anticipated demand and our engineers were able to rebalance the system”.

He can take or leave my words—I am not particularly bothered—but those are the words of the people who actually operate the energy system.

On the hon. Gentleman's final point, I absolutely agree with him on the importance of long-duration energy storage. That is why, for the first time in 40 years, this Government announced a new cap-and-floor regime to deliver new long-duration energy storage schemes. That is a huge step forward from the position under many previous Governments, and it will allow the building of the pumped hydro schemes and new innovative technologies that will deliver that energy storage. We are moving as fast as possible. I hope that he and his hon. Friends will support those decisions.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister for updating and reassuring the House and residents on the robustness of the system, and for his work taking forward a wider diversification of energy supply. Will he update the House on support for the take-up of heat pumps, to ensure that, in the long run, we are far less dependent on gas from overseas? Will he also say something about the importance of insulation and what the Government are doing to support further measures to encourage insulation?

Michael Shanks: My hon. Friend is right that as well as building an energy system that will deliver generation capacity for the future, we need to work as fast as possible to reduce demand. Part of that is about moving away from gas to heat pumps. That is important not just for our energy system and climate, but for individual households in reducing their bills. We already see a huge shift in the uptake of heat pumps across the country. There is, of course, much more to do on that if we are to reach our target, but the Government are committed to that, and it is important for households right across the country. I echo his points on insulation. Those in fuel poverty are more likely to live in houses that are cold. The more we can do to create warmer homes—that is what the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Peckham (Miatta Fahnbulleh), is doing—the better for everyone.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Last week was the coldest week of the winter. Also last week, 41.9% of our energy mix was gas and just about 25%

was wind. We have heard about issues with gas storage, and the Government are penalising the oil and gas sector by extending the windfall tax, not allowing new licences, and removing investment allowances. It feels like this Government are not taking our energy security seriously. Can the Minister reassure the House that that is not the case, and that he will engage with our oil and gas companies to ensure that we are secure in our energy today, despite what they are trying to do for the future?

Michael Shanks: I can give that assurance. Indeed, every month I have been in this job, I have been in Aberdeen, meeting oil and gas companies to discuss the issues. We are not going to agree on everything, but I have been very clear that there will be a long future for oil and gas in the North sea. Yes, we absolutely have said that we do not want to issue any new licences for new fields, but we will not revoke any existing licences. That means that there will continue to be work in the North sea for a long time to come.

I repeat that it is categorically untrue that our electricity or gas supplies have been at risk over the past week. We have robust systems in place, and they worked exactly as they should. Consumers lost absolutely no supply over the last few days, nor will they in the weeks and months ahead.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests about my membership of the energy unions, GMB and Unite. In 2017, the then energy Minister, the noble Lord Harrington, said:

“the closure of Rough will not cause a problem with security.”—[*Official Report*, 27 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 446.]

Will the Minister confirm that the five wasted years that followed before Rough was reopened at reduced capacity continue to impose restraints on the network? Will the Government take an open-minded approach to Centrica's proposals to gradually convert that storage capacity to hydrogen?

Michael Shanks: These are commercial decisions for Centrica, although if it brings those decisions to us, we will of course look at them. Let me reiterate that the UK has a robust set of storage facilities to ensure security of supply. Rough is one of them, but at moments such as this, in the winter, it is not the most important, because it is the slowest to move gas into the system. The remainder are in an entirely robust state and will continue to deliver, but as I have said, what it chooses to do with its site is a commercial matter for Centrica.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): We have heard in the House today about an over-reliance on gas, but surely, in reality, it is an over-reliance on imported gas. The forces of this Government seem to be driving us into the hands of foreign suppliers, and as much as 80% of our gas may be imported by 2030. Should we not support domestic sources of oil and gas, and back the 200,000 industry jobs found in constituencies across the land, rather than pushing those people off a cliff?

Michael Shanks: I take issue with two of those points. First, in the past decade, 100,000 jobs have already been lost from the oil and gas industry, and that happened

under a Government whom the hon. Gentleman supported. The industry is changing. We are putting in place a robust set of plans to help the workforce into the jobs of the future, rather than burying our heads in the sand and pretending that the basin in the North sea is not super-mature. Secondly, even if we were to extract more gas from our continental shelf, given that it is traded on an international market, and the pricing is set not by us but by the international market, we would continue to pay more for it, whether or not it came from the North sea, so that would not deal with the pricing issue reflected in the hon. Gentleman's question.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Did the Minister assume that after the Government had robbed pensioners of the winter fuel allowance, gas consumption would go down, or are this Government so obsessed with their net zero policy that they do not really care whether we have enough gas to meet our energy needs? Does the Minister not realise that being reliant on foreign suppliers will push up fuel prices in the UK? How does he justify the fact that under his net zero policy, the Government are ignoring the fact that we have 150 years-worth of gas naturally stored in the United Kingdom, and will not use it?

Michael Shanks: Let me repeat what I said a moment ago: even if we were to take much more gas from our continental shelf, it would still be traded on the international market. The reason why the right hon. Gentleman's constituents and mine still face a cost of living crisis is our exposure to petrostates and dictators around the world. He would clearly like to expose us to them even more, and I think that the Conservatives would support him in that, but we want to get ourselves off the rollercoaster of volatile fossil fuels and deliver a clean power system that is cheaper in the long run and delivers energy security. That is what is best for consumers, and for all our constituents.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): The Minister has several times mentioned energy security, and has said that the drive to net zero will make us more energy-secure, but now that Europe has learned the lesson of taking fossil fuels from Russia, we will take our renewable resources from China, which manufactures and processes the vast of majority of the materials needed. What contingency plans has the Minister made in case China decides to get into a trade war with the UK on renewables, or to cut off supply? The threats that could come from China are exactly the same as those that came from Russia about fossil fuels.

Michael Shanks: Let me say two things to the right hon. Gentleman. First, our approach to China is that we will co-operate when it is in our interest to do so, and will challenge when necessary. That is the point that the Chancellor is making. Secondly, the way to ensure that what he describes does not happen, and that we build as much as possible in this country, is to build an industrial base in this country and to bring clean power jobs to the UK. The last Government failed to do that. We are driving forward an industrial strategy that will ensure that the jobs that arise from the clean power plan that we designed are in this country. The Opposition can either support that or oppose it.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): This whole discussion underlines the importance of electricity storage, including at the battery energy storage system in my constituency, the Bredbury substation. How can we encourage more communities to welcome BESSs to their area, perhaps by considering community benefits, such as district heat networks?

Michael Shanks: The hon. Lady makes a really important point about energy storage in its various forms. Battery storage technology is moving forward extraordinarily quickly, and the short duration that we can get from batteries is improving quite considerably, so batteries will have a key role to play. Importantly, there is the potential for communities to drive some of that. We have been really clear in our local power plan that we want communities to be in the driving seat as much as possible, so that they can secure community benefits. We also want them to own some of the infrastructure. In a few weeks' time, I will visit a scheme in Scotland where the community would be able to own not just a battery storage project, but a wind turbine that fills the battery. They would get a double benefit from the energy that they are generating and able to store. We would like to see more such schemes right across the country.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I have a certain amount of sympathy for the hon. Member for Widnes and Halewood (Derek Twigg), whom the Minister slightly fobbed off with his answer. Now that he has had a chance to calm down and check his notes, I will ask the question again on the hon. Member's behalf: what have the Government done to advance the case for nuclear energy since they took power?

Michael Shanks: That is a very good question. I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me a second chance to reiterate that we inherited a whole series of plans that were not delivered. We have moved forward as quickly as possible to deliver significant projects, but we have also moved forward the competition on small modular reactors. *[Interruption.]* The shadow Minister says, "All you had to do was sign it off." Maybe he forgets the state in which he left some of his policies when he departed office.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): As well as improving energy storage, we should be improving energy efficiency in our homes. The average energy performance certificate rating for properties in Caerfyrddin is D; it comes fourth-lowest in Wales in that respect. The Government plan to increase the EPC rating for rented properties to C by 2030. If we are to meet that aim through insulation, what lessons can be learned from previous schemes, such as the ECO4 scheme, which has been beset with problems, including contractors carrying out poor work on the properties of older and vulnerable people?

Michael Shanks: That is a really important point. My hon. Friend the Minister for Energy Consumers is leading a review of some of this work, and will have more to say about it soon. We need a scheme that rolls out far more insulation to retrofit homes. We have also driven forward a higher standard for new houses, but the delivery of the schemes has been questionable in places. I recognise some of her points, and that is part of what we have been reviewing. I recently met my Welsh counterpart to talk about planning regulations that are being brought forward in Wales, which will also make a difference to these kinds of projects.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): In 2022, following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we saw a huge Government subsidy for household energy bills and an extra £15 billion per year in additional support for households. I appreciate that gas is traded globally and that the gas price moves globally, but if storage had been greater in 2022, could any of that £15 billion have been saved for taxpayers?

Michael Shanks: That is a really interesting question that I asked myself when I came into this role. Logically, we might assume so, but we do not empty the gas storage and then wait to refill it; we refill it constantly. That topping up will be done at whatever the price in the market at the time. The main reason why we would have used the gas in storage is that there is such demand in the system that the price is likely to be higher anyway. The hon. Gentleman makes a really important point, but I do not think that gas storage would have been the issue. I reiterate the point I made at the beginning: part of the reason why we have less gas storage than other European countries is that we have a different mix of routes to get gas in, and far more reliable supply chains for it, so we do not need to store quite as much as our European neighbours.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers and for what he has said so far. Approximately 330,000 homes and businesses in Northern Ireland are connected to gas, and there is also a scheme to enable social housing to use gas. That means that some of our elderly and most vulnerable people have no access to heating other than gas. How can the Government ensure that the most vulnerable in our society are guaranteed their gas supply over the next weeks, and how can the Government keep those in priority need at the top of the supply chain?

Michael Shanks: Characteristically, the hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and he has raised similar points with me before. It is important that the most vulnerable on the priority registers are prioritised for any additional support, and that is what we continue to do. Energy is a transferred matter in Northern Ireland, so I do not have a direct role to play in the gas system there, but I continue to engage with both Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive that have an interest in this topic, and we have talked about these issues most recently.

Sudan: US Determination of Genocide

4.15 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister for International Development for a statement following the United States' determination of genocide in Sudan.

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for bringing this important urgent question to the House, and to you, Mr Speaker, for granting it.

The evidence of abhorrent atrocities against civilians in Darfur is mounting. I am appalled by reports from the UN fact-finding mission, including those referring to acts of murder, mutilation, sexual violence and torture committed by warring parties. Such despicable acts are completely unacceptable. As we have discussed previously in this Chamber, the situation in Sudan is the worst humanitarian disaster anywhere in the world. The UK has pledged millions in lifesaving aid to Sudan and the wider region, and we are clear that this aid must be able to reach those in need unimpeded.

On the precise question raised by the right hon. Gentleman, the long-standing position of successive British Governments is that it is for the courts to decide whether genocide has occurred. While the UK therefore takes a different approach to genocide determination from that of the US, we condemn what is happening in the strongest terms. Irrespective of any genocide determination, it is clear that atrocities have been committed in this conflict and that those responsible must be held to account.

We strongly support the International Criminal Court's active investigation into the situation in Darfur, including allegations of crimes committed since April 2023. This support has included the secondment of expert investigators to support the ICC's work in a number of countries, including Sudan. Since the outbreak of the conflict in 2023, the UK has frozen the assets of nine commercial entities linked to the rapid support forces—the RSF—and the Sudanese armed forces, the SAF. On 8 November last year, the UN Security Council also sanctioned two RSF commanders involved in perpetrating ethnically motivated atrocities. There is a long-standing UK arms embargo in place for Sudan, as well as a UN arms embargo on Darfur. The UK worked closely with the US to renew the UN regime on 11 September 2024. The UK has also led the establishment of the independent fact-finding mission at the Human Rights Council, and funds the Centre for Information Resilience to collect evidence of abuse and support accountability efforts.

In conclusion, we are determined to do all we can, as the UK, to work with others to press the warring parties to abide by international law and to protect civilians, collecting information, promoting prevention and ensuring accountability.

Mr Mitchell: My purpose today is not to criticise the Government but to urge them to do more on what is without doubt the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. I wish not to detain the House on the high politics of the region, but to focus on the unspeakable suffering of the Sudanese civilians, who for almost two years have borne the brunt of the most appalling violence

perpetrated by the two warring factions. Today, 25 million people need urgent humanitarian assistance, with over 8 million internally displaced and a further 3 million seeking refuge in Chad, Egypt, Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Above all, we face the unconscionable situation where a horrific famine looms over millions of people, which will lead unbearably to hundreds of thousands of women, children and men starving to death before our eyes. And if that is not enough, the violence perpetrated by the RSF—particularly, but not only, in Darfur—is explicitly identity-based, involving the targeting of black African tribes such as the Masalit and Zaghawa. Right now in El Fasher, Darfur, over 500,000 civilians face siege and the triple threat of identity-based mass violence, armed conflict and famine.

Last week, the US Secretary of State, Tony Blinken, called these horrors out for what they are: genocide. His determination is surely the clarion call for the UK, as the penholder on Sudan at the United Nations, to confront genocide and crimes against humanity in Sudan. Will the Minister set out the Government's approach to atrocity crimes in Sudan? Will she consider funding Adama Dieng's office as the African Union special adviser on the prevention of genocide?

Many of us have long warned that Sudan is the forgotten crisis. I saw this for myself on the border between Chad and Darfur last year. It has come to pass that the world's neglect has allowed appalling crimes to thrive. Now, more than ever, it is time for British international leadership to shine the spotlight, to prick the world's conscience and to bend every sinew of our capabilities to bring this indescribable horror to an end.

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his commitment to this issue, which I know is shared by many Members from every party in this House. We are determined to do something about these appalling events, and I am grateful for the passion and determination with which he rightly speaks.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the dreadful violence unfolding in Sudan and the humanitarian situation. Since he and I last spoke in this place, the integrated food security phase classification was determined, on Christmas eve. It makes for truly terrible reading to see that five areas of Sudan are now classified as being in famine.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the need for political leadership, which this new Government are determined to deliver at every level, from the Prime Minister down. The Foreign Secretary has prioritised this issue, as have I and the Minister for Africa. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman saw that we, along with Sierra Leone, were determined to press the critical issue of protecting civilians at the Security Council. We were appalled that Russia decided to exercise its veto, as it absolutely should not have done, because this is an issue where human suffering is seen in such appalling relief.

The right hon. Gentleman asks about the UK's work on atrocity prevention. I have talked about our work on the fact-finding mission. I was pleased to see the additional support from African countries when the mission was renewed. The UK has worked on this with the African Union, and we continue to do so. I raised this when I met the African Union in Addis Ababa.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman talks about the need for this crisis not to be forgotten. We are determined to ensure that we use every mechanism available to us—bilateral, multilateral, within this Chamber and beyond—to raise the profile of this issue, and to ensure that the UK does what it can. Of course, we have doubled our aid to Sudan, reflecting this appalling crisis.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): At this hour, the situation is horrendous, with 6.9 million people at risk of gender-based violence and 75% of children out of school. The US also announced new sanctions when it made the announcement. Will the Government review their sanctions policy, in relation both to the perpetrating networks on the ground and to the enablers abroad?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the matter of conflict-related sexual violence in Sudan, and for the work that she and others have undertaken on it. We had a debate on this subject in Westminster Hall last week, which raised the horrendous reports coming from Sudan about the impact on women and girls. She talks about the number of children who are out of school, and her figure probably includes informal schooling. It appears that around 90% of children in Sudan are out of formal schooling, which is terrible for them both right now and into the future. They really should be in school, and we will always ensure that we do what we can to ensure accountability. Our sanctions policy is always under review but we do not talk about the details in the Chamber, because to do so would reduce their effectiveness.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for securing this important urgent question. It is right that we take seriously the fact that the US Administration have made a genocide determination in respect of Sudan and imposed what they call "accountability measures". As the Minister has recognised, we have a distinct mechanism for determining genocide and it is right that the Government stand by that.

Notwithstanding that, we recognise that the US's decision is designed to confront the abhorrent brutality that the world is witnessing against the innocent people of Sudan, with appalling atrocities, as we have heard already, committed against civilians and completely unjustifiable restrictions on humanitarian aid. With millions needing urgent food assistance, Sudan is hurtling towards a man-made catastrophe of unimaginable scale. The Government need to do everything in their power to press the warring parties into a ceasefire and to hold those responsible for the atrocities to account, because red lines have been crossed in the conflict and we cannot stand by.

As the Minister knows, the Conservative Government applied a regime of sanctions on those supporting the activities of the Rapid Support Forces and the Sudanese armed forces. In the light of America's decision, do the Government intend now to go further on sanctions and to mirror the United States? What is her strategy for trying to deter non-domestic involvement in the conflict? Do the Government intend to provide additional expertise

[Priti Patel]

and resources to help ensure that the perpetrators of the crimes, including those in Darfur, are brought to justice? How will we leverage our position on the UN Security Council?

On the humanitarian side, what pressure are the Government exerting to smash through what are now arbitrary obstacles blocking aid delivery? What assurances can the Minister give the House that UK aid is ending up in the right places? Finally, what assessment do the Government make of the US's new determination?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for the important points she raises, and I am pleased that there is cross-party agreement on so many of these matters. I agree with her characterisation of the relationship between UK and US activity on these issues, and the fact that the UK has a distinct mechanism on determination. She talked about the fact that this is a man-made crisis, and that is absolutely right. There is nothing inevitable about the extreme suffering we see in Sudan. We call on all warring parties to cease fire and to put the needs of civilians at the forefront of their minds, rather than continuing with this appalling conflict.

The right hon. Lady asked about the actions of other nations. I and other Ministers have made it clear from the Dispatch Box that there is no reason for any other country to be engaged in Sudan, other than to provide humanitarian support; they should not be involved for any other reason.

Priti Patel *indicated assent.*

Anneliese Dodds: I am pleased to see the right hon. Lady nodding.

The right hon. Lady asked about the political pushes and the mechanism we have been seeking to use. We will keep up the pressure at the UN Security Council, and the Foreign Secretary has been seeking to use that mechanism as much as possible. When we last discussed these matters, it was before the UK special representative to Sudan, Richard Crowder, was able to visit Port Sudan in December last year. I was pleased that happened as it was the first time we had had a UK delegation in Sudan since the conflict began. It is really important that we can be there to put pressure on the parties to the conflict.

As I have mentioned, we keep our sanctions under review but will not comment on future designations, for reasons that the right hon. Lady fully understands. We have been seeking to use our expertise. We are determined to do all we can to support the International Criminal Court, across a whole range of different theatres of conflict and different situations where it is active. Part of that work includes its activities in relation to Sudan.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): As we have heard, the situation for women and girls is particularly severe in Sudan, with reports of gender-based violence surging, including kidnapping, forced marriage, child marriage and intimate partner violence. In fact, the UN has reported a 288% increase in the number of survivors of gender-based violence seeking its case management services. Will the Minister outline what steps we are taking to ensure that those perpetrating gender-based violence are being held to account?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this matter. I know that she is deeply concerned about it and has experience of it from before she entered this place, as do a number of Members. She referred to some of the reports. The UN panel of experts released significant information, as we have already discussed in the House. Attacks have even taken place within special, theoretically protected areas such as camps for internally displaced people. The fact that women and girls have risked being raped within those camps, when travelling, at checkpoints and even in their own homes is truly appalling.

We must ensure that there is accountability. As I mentioned, we have been working to renew the fact-finding mission, as well as working with civil society mechanisms to collate related information from social media to ensure that it feeds into the overall picture. As in any situation where the facts need to be established, that will be critical for the accountability mechanisms, including but not limited to the ICC.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): In three months, we will reach the second anniversary of the terrible conflict in Sudan. Can the Minister update us on the Government's work to deliver a political process to secure a ceasefire before then, so that a civilian Administration can begin the work of reconstruction?

In the light of the judgment of the US Administration, can the Minister give the House a date by which the Government will have determined whether genocide is being committed? Last October, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) declared on behalf of the then Government that ethnic cleansing was taking place in Sudan. What have been the consequences of that designation, and what more can the UK do to gather evidence of those crimes? As the Minister mentioned, Russia's veto of the Security Council resolution is yet one more example of its shameful role in world affairs, but the needs of children, women and ethnic groups for protection is greater, not less, as a result. Can she outline what actions the UK is taking to secure safe zones for schools and hospitals?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his important questions. He is right to refer to the fact that we are approaching the second anniversary of the conflict, which has had a truly awful impact on civilians. He asked about the political mechanisms that we will use to seek a ceasefire. I referred to the first visit to Sudan by a UK delegation since the conflict began. As I also mentioned, we are seeking to use our role within the UN Security Council and our leadership of the Sudan core group within the UN Human Rights Council. On top of that, we are seeking to use every instance of bilateral and multilateral engagement to put these issues at the forefront, because we see the immensity of the suffering within Sudan.

The hon. Gentleman asked about a date for determination. I do not want to bore the House by restating the Government's approach, which is the same as that of previous Governments, but we believe that robustness and trust in the determination of these issues are important. That means ensuring that there are effective international instruments, driven by experts. In the International Criminal Court, it is through

determinations of expert lawyers, based on evidence that is internationally trusted, that decisions on such matters will be reached, including this one. He asked about evidence. I refer him to my previous remarks about the work that we have been undertaking, especially with the fact-finding mission. We will seek to do all that we can to build on that in the months to come.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Minister's response, and ask that the Government continue to keep the House regularly updated. As the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) said, the House should not forget this issue. In December, I met Islamic Relief, which is based in my constituency, and it gave me an update on some of the work it has been doing. It told me that at least 50 aid workers had been killed and 45 wounded since the war in Sudan started. Several aid organisations have had to suspend their work due to attacks on their staff members, and over 120 humanitarian offices have been looted. Sadly, aid workers are the first line of defence for many of the innocent civilians we are desperately trying to help in this escalating conflict. The Minister outlined the additional funding from the UK Government, but what more can she say about specific actions that the UK is taking to prevent the targeting of innocent humanitarian aid workers in Sudan?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising those incredibly important issues. She is right that it is important that the Government keep Members of this House informed about developments. I can report that my officials briefed the all-party parliamentary group for Sudan and South Sudan. I am happy to ensure that that route for information is maintained, but I am also grateful to the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for raising this urgent question and to any Members who wish to discuss the matter with me.

My hon. Friend talked about Islamic Relief, and I want to praise its work and that of other non-governmental organisations that are active in trying to ensure that support is received by those in such desperate need within Sudan. She talked about the impact on aid workers. We have recently passed through one of the most deadly periods globally for aid workers. As she mentioned, about 50 aid workers are assessed to have been killed in Sudan and about 300 in Gaza. We also see aid workers being held hostage in Yemen. The UK Government are determined to ensure that those issues are raised and that we enable those who spend much of their lives in situations of danger to help others to do so in safety and security, and with the protection of international humanitarian law.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I welcome this urgent question because it is an opportunity to shine a light on these appalling events. Unfortunately, following the right hon. Lady's last statement, we did not get much attention—even national attention—on them, and we must all try to ensure that we do. Does she still think that the Jeddah process can bring the warring parties together? What specific action have the UK Government taken in relation to international partners, such as the United Arab Emirates, to encourage them to play a positive role in the conflict?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for raising those issues. I am keen to work across the House to elevate the salience of this dreadful situation. He mentioned the Jeddah process. The new UK Government are clear, as I believe were the previous Government, that both warring parties have to engage with those mechanisms. Of course, commitments were made by the warring parties during the Jeddah process that have not been held to. They must be held to, and they must both engage with the mechanisms being created to seek a ceasefire. Instead, we have seen a frustrating situation where there may have been engagement by the RSF on some and by the SAF on others. They both must engage for the sake of civilians within Sudan and the many refugees beyond it.

The right hon. Gentleman asked what we are doing in relation to other countries. I will repeat what I said before: the new Government are clear—again, as I believe were the previous Government—that there must not be engagement from other countries in this conflict, aside from delivering the humanitarian aid in Sudan that is desperately needed. That is very clear—the Sudanese people have suffered enough.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): UNICEF's latest figures estimate that 3.2 million children in Sudan face acute malnutrition this year, putting them at severe risk of death. The limited humanitarian access, which is limited by all warring parties, is to blame for this crisis. Will the Government tell us what discussions they have had with actors in Sudan and with regional actors to ensure full humanitarian access for those most at risk in Sudan, including, importantly, children?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that issue. I know he is deeply concerned about developments over recent months. Of course, a significant one has been the changes we have seen over time at the Adre crossing, which is critical for ensuring that aid can pass into some of the areas of Sudan that are under the most intense pressure, particularly when it comes to food supplies. It is important that the Adre crossing is kept open permanently. Of course, we welcome the agreement to extend the opening of that crossing beyond the initial three-month extension to 15 November, but it should be open for the future—that is important.

We also need the RSF to commit to urgently facilitating access across lines of conflict. We need openness to aid, both into Sudan and then within Sudan, across lines between the warring parties, to get support to those who are so in need, including children, as my hon. Friend rightly says.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): When the Government last announced their aid package, one area was in famine and four were on the brink. Those five areas are now in famine, another five are expected to be by the spring, and a further 17 are at risk. As the hunger crisis spirals, less than 10% of those in affected areas are getting humanitarian assistance. What new diplomatic steps are the Government taking to get food into those affected areas, and will they be commit to further funding for humanitarian assistance in view of that ever-spiralling famine?

Anneliese Dodds: I will be brief so that we can get to more questions, Madam Deputy Speaker. I can inform the hon. Lady that, following that truly disturbing

[Anneliese Dodds]

determination by the IPC, the UK requested an urgent open briefing at the UN Security Council on 6 January, in which we called for a lifting of all bureaucratic impediments, improved humanitarian access and a political solution to the conflict, so that the food and nutrition catastrophe does not deepen further.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): The Minister says that the US process for identifying genocide is different from ours. Where does she think we are in that process, and what role does she see for the Law Officers in making a determination? If it is a question of evidence, would she not be wise to follow the suggestion of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) to fund the office of the African Union special envoy on the prevention of genocide?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that subject, about which we talked a little previously. To underline the UK's position, we believe it important that there are international mechanisms for determinations on these critical issues because there must be international trust for those determinations to carry weight. That is the UK's approach. When it comes to accountability, evidence gathering and acting on the evidence, we have sought to ensure that the UK supports those mechanisms, including the International Criminal Court. I have talked before about the UK's contribution to that Court.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Since we last discussed this horror on 29 October, I am not aware of any major news coverage of it. How is it that it goes so under-reported? Is it simply too dangerous for journalists to be there? The Minister stresses the wish for no other country to intervene, but is it not the case that genocides tend to go on until someone stops the people committing them?

Anneliese Dodds: The right hon. Gentleman asks about media coverage. I was pleased that the BBC produced a major package on Tom Fletcher's visit. I am very pleased that there was that UN engagement, which is incredibly important. We need more focus on the situation. Indeed, that is how I would respond—very briefly, Madam Deputy Speaker—to the right hon. Gentleman's third point. One of the most important things in the prevention of atrocities is the ability for journalists, fact-finders, investigators and experts to visit, and the UK has been supporting that in our activity. Finally, he asks about how we can ensure that there is a greater profile on these issues from the UK side. As I mentioned earlier, I was very pleased that the UK's Richard Crowder was able to visit Sudan. It is important that we have a presence in that country.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Following on from the previous question, there was a harrowing series on Sudan last week in which *The Times* reported that enforced starvation had been part of the arsenal of war. I know that the Sudanese community in Newport are deeply concerned for their friends and family, with no end to the conflict in sight. The doubling in November of the UK's humanitarian assistance was vital, but my constituents want the Minister to reassure them on what the Government are doing to combat the deliberate restriction of aid.

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the commitment of the Sudanese diaspora in Newport to supporting people in Sudan. I have seen that from people from the diaspora in communities right across the country, and indeed more broadly, with so many people who have seen the details of what is taking place in Sudan being desperately concerned about it. I reassure her that we are determined to do all that we can to ensure that lifesaving aid in food, healthcare and other means is delivered to people in need so that the people who are suffering so much in Sudan are protected.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): We all remember the appalling comments of the Foreign Secretary in October when he said that genocide is a legal term, which

“must be determined by international courts”,

which is appropriate only

“when millions of people lost their lives”.—[*Official Report*, 28 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 556.]

The special adviser to the UN Secretary-General on the prevention of genocide has said that the situation today in Sudan

“bears all the marks of risk of genocide”.

The US Secretary of State has determined that the RSF and its aligned militias have committed genocide. In the UK, Protection Approaches' director said that

“the people of Sudan face unimaginable precarity under a triple threat of war, genocide and famine.”

Why is it that time after time in this House we are so reticent about using the word “genocide” when it is all around us and the evidence is there for us to see? Does the Minister stand by the Foreign Secretary's assessment that it is only for international courts to make the assessment that millions must die before the term genocide can be used? Does she believe that the US Secretary of State's use of the term “genocide” undermines its seriousness?

Anneliese Dodds: The Government believe it is critical that we have an approach to determining genocide that is consistent with our obligations under the genocide convention and the Rome statute. They are incredibly important. As I have said before, to have trust internationally in the system, it is critical that we ensure there is a clear, impartial and independent methodology for the determination of genocide. That is important because of the seriousness of the matter of which we speak.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): In 2004, General Colin Powell, who was then the US Secretary of State, referred to events in Darfur as genocide, but action was not taken. A genocide took place in Rwanda—it was not prevented—and there were similar events in Iraq where the Kurds suffered a genocide. Irrespective of definitions of genocide, does my right hon. Friend agree that more external pressure is needed from the international community to deter those who would commit war crimes and ensure that humanitarian aid gets in, irrespective of local opposition?

Anneliese Dodds: Yes, I do on all counts.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Almost daily, we see reports about what is going on in Gaza or Ukraine, yet, as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest

East (Sir Julian Lewis) mentioned, we see hardly anything about the situation in Sudan. Clearly this is genocide, and the most important thing now will probably be the attitude that the incoming Administration in the United States take towards it. What discussion has the Minister, or any Foreign Office Minister, had with the incoming Trump Administration on the action they will take to support our penholder initiatives in Sudan?

Anneliese Dodds: It is critical that the UK works with the US, and as the hon. Member would expect we have been working with our US counterparts on this issue, but it is also important that we work with others, particularly within the region. That is why we have been having particularly committed and repeated discussions with the African Union, for example, and why we are working with Sierra Leone on the fact-finding mission renewal.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for his continued work on this matter. Reports from Sudan are deeply harrowing. With the UN highlighting the staggering scale of sexual violence being perpetrated, particularly by the RSF, there is credible evidence that some women and girls are taking their lives or contemplating suicide as a pre-emptive measure. That that is happening in 2024 is absolutely appalling, and it is horrendous that it is happening without any international attention. Will the Minister state what work we are doing with international partners to ensure that we are delivering as much humanitarian funding as possible?

Anneliese Dodds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: some of the reports we have heard in this regard are extremely disturbing. The UK is supporting the work of UN bodies on this issue, particularly the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. When it comes to aid, as my hon. Friend mentioned, we are ensuring that we seek to support those who have been the victims of these horrific crimes, including helping partners to provide clinical treatment, dignity kits and psychosocial services for survivors.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): Is the Minister committed to the introduction of a no-fly zone across Sudan, including drones, as is currently the case in Darfur?

Anneliese Dodds: A number of different mechanisms have been advocated in relation to Sudan, seeking to ensure that the appalling conflict there ends. Of course, there is already an arms embargo in relation to Darfur, and there is the UN arms embargo as well. However, so far, we have not seen those mechanisms deliver the results that are so desperately needed. The UK is determined to work with our partners and internationally so that we can have the ceasefire that is so desperately needed. That is the focus of our activity, as well as atrocity prevention and aid, as we have discussed.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I know that the Sudanese community in my constituency welcome the UK's leadership at the UN Security Council in pushing for a ceasefire, but it is deeply concerning that seven RSF-owned companies in the United Arab Emirates have been named and sanctioned by the US for supplying

the finance and military equipment to sustain what is happening. Can the Minister update us on what conversations the Government will have with the UAE, our ally, to account for its role in enabling this unimaginable violence?

Anneliese Dodds: We have had conversations with a range of different countries, both those right next to Sudan—which, of course, are seeing huge refugee movements within their borders—and those that have been involved in broader discussions around these matters. Our position remains that there should not be engagement of any other nation within Sudan, unless it is to deliver the humanitarian aid that is needed.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): As the horrendous nature of this conflict becomes apparent, I concur with many Members in this Chamber that it is a forgotten conflict. I thank the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for bringing this urgent question to the House, especially when we read reports indicating a dramatic increase in gender-based violence, including over 2,000 cases of sexual violence reported in Darfur alone since the beginning of the conflict. As the penholder on Sudan at the United Nations Security Council, what steps is the UK taking to work with the International Criminal Court and the international community to ensure accountability for the perpetrators of that crime, and of genocide per se?

Anneliese Dodds: First, in relation to accountability, we have indeed been working with the ICC, as we would do on any issue. Of course, the ICC is rightly strategically and operationally independent; as the UK, we are determined to make sure we are contributing to its overall expertise while it acts independently. The hon. Gentleman also talked about the UK's role as penholder. That has been very important for us, particularly in seeking to get agreement at the UN Security Council about the protection of civilians. As I mentioned before, Russia's exercise of the veto on that subject was disgraceful.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): Sexual violence is growing as a weapon of war and oppression, as was discussed last Thursday in Westminster Hall. Can the Minister reassure the House that despite the previous Government's cuts to the aid budget, she will do as much as she can to protect the women and girls in Sudan, seeking additional funds from the Treasury if necessary?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for again raising, as so many Members have, the situation of women and girls in Sudan. We will seek to use every mechanism available to ensure that the UK is contributing to the protection of the women and young girls at such risk in Sudan. During this statement, we have heard many reports about the appalling treatment they have received, and they must be protected in the future.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Conflicts such as this and genocides such as this tend to create refugees. Have the Government made an assessment of what the continuation of this conflict will do to the number of Sudanese refugees seeking asylum in the United Kingdom, and if so, will the Minister share it with us, please?

Anneliese Dodds: The reality of the situation so far is that, although there have been very significant population movements, they have been into the countries neighbouring Sudan, particularly Chad, but also South Sudan, and many people have travelled to Egypt and further afield. Their situation has been very difficult in many cases. I have talked directly to those pushed out of Sudan because of the conflict into South Sudan when I was there last year. The UK will seek to do all we can to protect those individuals.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Twenty years ago, the Save Darfur coalition was one of the biggest international social movements of its time, but today the campaigning voices of charities and NGOs on the conflict in Sudan are not being amplified in quite the same way, certainly not by Governments. Why does the Minister suppose this is, and what more can the British Government do to amplify the appeals for support from humanitarian organisations?

Anneliese Dodds: We have been seeking to amplify the voices of charities in this area. I have met them myself, and I have been particularly keen to ensure that I have heard directly from those operating in Sudan and those running the emergency response rooms. Those incredibly brave individuals, who are neutral in relation to the different warring parties in this conflict, are determined to support those who are suffering so much. The UK Government will try to ensure that their profile is increased in the weeks and months to come.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for her answers. She is an honourable and passionate lady, and her grasp of the grave realities facing Sudan is very evident from her answers. I thank her for that.

The RSF and its sponsors, emboldened by international inaction, act with impunity, laughing at the lack of decisive intervention. Women and girls are being subjected to systematic sexual violence, villages are being razed and entire communities are being uprooted on the basis of their ethnic identity. The suffering is staggering, and the silence from global powers is deafening. Can the Minister confirm that strong measures and international leadership are needed, otherwise Sudan will collapse further into chaos, spreading instability and suffering, and pushing the conflict far beyond the Sudanese borders?

Anneliese Dodds: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks. I have to say that I am so pleased to see that we have very strong cross-party concern on this issue and a determination to really make a difference for those suffering so much in Sudan and beyond its borders as refugees. He is right to point out that, should there continue to be this level of instability in Sudan itself, that will have a further knock-on impact. We are already seeing people in Chad under considerable pressure when it comes to food supplies as very large numbers of people are coming through from Sudan, and we have seen the same in South Sudan, so this conflict really is having a terrible impact regionally as well as in Sudan.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the Minister for her comprehensive responses.

Artificial Intelligence Opportunities Action Plan

4.58 pm

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): With permission, I would like to make a statement about the Government's AI opportunities action plan.

This Government were elected on a programme of change. Today, we are publishing the latest step in delivering our plan for change with the AI opportunities action plan. Our plan for change is clear: we will grow the economy, backing British business, with good jobs putting more money in working people's pockets; and we will rebuild our crumbling public services, too, providing our people with world-class healthcare and education. That ambition shapes our approach to artificial intelligence—the technology set to define our shared future economic and social progress.

AI is no longer the stuff of sci-fi movies and “Dr Who”; the AI revolution is right here and right now. In NHS hospitals, AI is helping doctors to detect and treat disease faster and more effectively, reducing patient waits and saving more lives. In local schools, AI is equipping teachers with the tools to spend more time helping every pupil to achieve their full potential. In high streets across the country, small businesses have started using AI to grow their companies and compete on the global stage.

The applications are boundless and the opportunities profound, but only those countries with the courage to seize them will fully benefit. We do not get to decide whether AI will become part of our world—it already is; the choice is between waiting for AI to reshape our lives, or shaping the future of that technology so that the British economy and working people reap its maximum benefit. We choose fully to embrace the opportunity that AI presents to build a better future for all our citizens. Anything less would be a dereliction of duty.

Since the first industrial revolution, science and technological progress has been the single greatest force of change. Once again, a reforming Labour Government are called to harness the white heat of scientific revolution in the interests of working people. From ending hospital backlogs to securing home-grown energy and giving children the best start in life, AI is essential to our programme of change.

Championing change is in Britons' DNA—we pioneered the age of steam. I believe that Britain can be a leader now, in the AI age. With world-class talent, excellent universities and an unrivalled record of scientific discovery, we can do so. Home to success stories such as Google DeepMind, ARM and Wayve, we have the third largest AI market in the world.

Just as we have been on AI safety, I believe that Britain has a responsibility to provide global leadership by fairly and effectively seizing the opportunities that AI presents to improve lives. That is why in July last year I asked Matt Clifford to prepare the AI opportunities action plan. Across 50 recommendations, that plan shows how we can shape the application of AI in a modern social market economy, anchored in principles of shared prosperity, improved public services and increased personal opportunity. Through partnership with leading

companies and researchers, we will strengthen the foundations of our AI ecosystem, use AI to deliver real change for our citizens, and secure our future by ensuring that we are home to the firms right at the frontier of this technology.

Change has already started. Our transformative planning reforms will make it easier to build data centres—the industrial engines of the AI age. Skills England will prepare British people to be active participants in tomorrow's business successes. The digital centre of government will use technology to transform the relationship between the modern state and citizens. However, faced with a technology that shows no signs of slowing, we must move faster and further. We are taking forward recommendations to expand Britain's sovereign AI compute capacity by at least 20 times by 2030, ensuring that British researchers can access the tools they need to develop cutting-edge AI.

We will create AI growth zones to speed up the construction of critical compute infrastructure right across the United Kingdom. With enhanced access to power and streamlined planning approvals, those zones will bring faster growth and better jobs to communities who have missed out in the past. The first pilot AI growth zone will be at Culham in Oxfordshire, a world-renowned hub for clean energy and fusion research. They will pioneer innovative partnerships with business to deliver secure dedicated computing capacity that supports our national priorities. We will also seek a private sector partner to develop one of the UK's largest AI data centres, beginning with 100 MW of capacity, with plans to scale up to 500 MW.

One of the biggest barriers to success in the AI age is the immense amount of energy that the technology uses. The Energy Secretary and I are convening and co-chairing a new AI energy council to provide expert insight into how to meet this demand, including opportunities to accelerate investment in innovative solutions, such as small modular reactors.

Infrastructure alone, though, is not enough. To deliver security, prosperity and opportunity for every citizen into the long term, we must be makers of this technology, and not just takers. Britain needs our own national champions—our own Googles and Microsofts. We are launching a new dedicated team with a mandate to strengthen our sovereign AI capacities by supporting high-potential frontier AI companies in the UK. This team will work across and beyond Government, partnering with the fast-growing firms to ensure that they can access the compute capacity, the data and the global talent they need to succeed in Britain.

We have already seen how a small number of companies at the frontier of AI are set to wield outsized global influence. We have a narrow window of opportunity to secure a stake in the future of AI. By acting now, we can secure a better future for the British people in the decades to come, but this is just the start. We will safely unlock the value of public sector data assets to support secure, responsible and ethical AI innovation. We will overhaul the skills system to safeguard our status as a top destination for global talent, with a workforce ready for the AI age. We will use a scan, pilot and scale approach to quickly identify and trial ways of using AI to transform our economy and improve our public services.

[Peter Kyle]

The stakes just could not be higher. This is a top priority for the Prime Minister and across Government. We will harness the power of AI to fulfil our promise to the British people of better jobs, better public services and better lives. We have attracted more than £25 billion-worth of investment into AI since we took office. This week alone, global giants have committed a further £14 billion-worth of investment. Phase 2 of the spending review will see every Department using technology to drive forward our national missions to deliver better value for taxpayers. AI will also be fundamental to the industrial strategy to attract investment, to grow the economy and to create high-quality, well-paid jobs across the country.

The AI revolution is now. This Government are determined to fully harness this opportunity for British businesses and working people right across the United Kingdom. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

5.8 pm

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. Let me begin by thanking Matt Clifford for his work. Having known Matt for many years, I am grateful for his long-standing contribution to the tech sector, including with the last Conservative Government.

It was that last Conservative Government who identified the opportunities of AI early, and we acted decisively. We kept Britain out of the EU's anti-growth regulatory regime, enabling our tech sector to flourish. In contrast, the Secretary of State is on record praising the EU's approach to AI, which even President Macron rejected. Will the Secretary rule out regulatory alignment with the EU on AI issues? We also launched the incubator for AI, which led on groundbreaking work to improve productivity, and the gov.uk chatbot, both of which were led by my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart). Can the Secretary of State guarantee the future of both projects under this Government?

We also provided £500 million for AI compute, because our AI sector requires cutting-edge computing power, as well as more energy to power data centres. Labour's energy policy is taking our country to the brink of blackouts. Instead of just launching another quango—the AI energy council—can the Secretary of State assure the House that the AI sector will have reliable access to all the energy it needs? It was a Conservative Government who organised the world's first AI safety summit and delivered the world's third largest AI market, fostering an environment in which Sir Demis Hassabis won the Nobel prize last year. Even the Prime Minister admitted today that when it comes to AI, Britain starts with a position of strength.

The bad news is that Labour is already squandering the world-leading AI position that we built up for Britain. Last July, one of Labour's first actions on entering government was to cut £1.3 billion of funding for Britain's first exascale supercomputer and the AI research resource—both of which Matt Clifford's report says deserve support. Why did the Secretary of State not stand up to the Chancellor when she cut the funding

last July? Anyone reading the plan will see that it has been fully drenched in Labour gobbledegook, peppered with references to “missions”, “mission delivery boards”, “clusters”, “sector champions” and even “local trusted intermediaries”. Its plan confirms what everyone suspected all along: Labour prefers technocratic jargon over the actual tech sector.

The plan was ready last September and due to be published last November. Why did Labour delay publication again and again, and finally choose a day when it needed to divert attention away from the beleaguered Chancellor? What is not in the plan is even more telling than what is. First, there is nothing to correct the huge damage that Labour has already inflicted on the AI sector through the Chancellor's national insurance jobs tax, which punishes every tech worker by £900 per person per year. Will the Secretary of State apologise today for making our tech workers take a wage cut and for reducing their living standards?

Labour's response is full of aspirational dates for targets to be met, but there are no specific plans setting out how it will achieve the targets or pay for them—so much for the Chancellor's iron grip on the public finances. Given that there is no new funding, will the Secretary of State give a precise date for publishing his spending plans, and confirm what funding will be cut from existing projects to pay for this plan's 50 new commitments? Why have the Government created two more AI quangos today? The Prime Minister has announced or created a quango almost every week since coming to office. Today, it is clearly the tech sector's turn. Will the Secretary of State reassure the House and the country that his two new AI quangos will not just tie up our tech sector in more red tape?

Last week, the Chancellor fled the country. As she headed east, our economy went south. Labour promised growth but it has delivered failure. It has published an underwhelming plan three months late. It has punished our tech workers with the national insurance jobs tax. It has saddled our tech sector with red tape and more quangos, and it aligns itself with the EU when everybody else is saying no. Labour's delayed AI plan is analogue Government in the digital age: slow, uninspiring and not good enough for Britain. Our country deserves the best, but Labour has let Britain down again.

Peter Kyle: I am kind of grateful for the hon. Member's comments, but I feel a bit sorry for him. He praised Matt Clifford and his independent report, because Matt Clifford is an astonishing person—as a House we should all give credit to somebody who has been so successful in the tech sector out there in the real economy, while giving up so much time for public service. I am grateful for him. But the hon. Member then went on to talk about his report as if it is Labour's report, “full of gobbledegook”. It was not Labour's report but Matt Clifford's report. If the hon. Member respected Matt Clifford, he would not be attacking the very report that he authored. I did not author it; I just looked at the recommendations, saw the logic and the scale of the ambition in it and said yes. We share that sense of ambition and we will deliver it, too.

If the hon. Member cared so much about compute and the exascale computer, his Government would have done something fundamental to deliver it. They would have allocated the money. If they are standing up in

public and saying that they will deliver something, it is pretty basic stuff to allocate the resources to deliver it. That project never existed, because the money never existed. It was a fraud committed on the scientific community of our country—smoke and mirrors from the outset. All I did was be honest with the public about the scale of the deceit inflicted on them. I corrected a wrong from the previous Administration.

Today, we have a plan. The task set for Matt Clifford was not to look at what Government—particularly the previous Government—are capable of and then to try to design a programme limited by the scale of their chaotic abilities. Instead, the Prime Minister and I asked Matt Clifford to look at our country's potential if we get everything right on the digital infrastructure and opportunities of the future, and that is what his plan has done. There are things this Government need to do differently in order to realise the potential out there in our country, and that is what we have set about doing today by accepting all 50 recommendations.

When they were in office, the Conservatives did down our country; now, in opposition, they do nothing but talk it down. That is a shame.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I welcome the Government embracing AI and the Secretary of State's leadership in accepting every single one of Matt Clifford's recommendations—I hope he will be as receptive in accepting the recommendations of my Committee. Does the Secretary of State agree that those who say this plan is irrelevant to the challenges of economic growth in public sector financing that we are facing fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the opportunities that AI represents, its presence everywhere in our lives already, the frenetic pace of its implementation and its ability to drive growth? Most importantly, however, they misunderstand the nature of business confidence. Having a Government who understand how to drive these opportunities into every home, business and public sector service in the land is a reason for business confidence.

Peter Kyle: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for her comments and for the service of her Committee. It was a privilege to go before her Committee so soon after its formation, and I look forward to engaging in the future. She is completely right. We hear a lot about business confidence and the words that come out of certain parts of the business community, but today, they have voted with their investment. We have announced an additional £14 billion and the creation of up to 13,000 jobs as a result of today's investment—that is business showing confidence in this Government. Of course, for many of the schemes announced today, the policies will deliver into the short, medium and long term. Together with our regulatory innovation office and our planning reforms, that investment will mean that shovels go into the ground quickly, and the jobs and wealth that will be created by it will start paying dividends very soon.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement.

We are all too aware of the economic malaise inherited from the previous Conservative Government. Innovation in technology can help to reverse years of decline, and the UK must be a world leader in quality innovation. From helping to save lives to boosting our economy, good tech is good for business, and that is why safety and AI innovation must go hand in hand. We must build trust and bring people along, not risk breeding suspicion or fear. As the Ada Lovelace Institute said this morning,

"there will be no bigger roadblock to AI's transformative potential than a failure in public confidence."

The national data library would represent a major shift in public sector data handling. How will the Government ensure the necessary safeguards are in place? How will they maintain public confidence?

While the focus on AI training is welcome, we must go beyond high-level skills. Not only are tech companies themselves calling out for technical skills, but AI is here now, shaping workplaces, services and lives. What is being done to ensure all sectors of society can access lifelong learning and training? Where is the strategy to address digital exclusion so that no one is left behind? Furthermore, the text and data mining regime is a concern. Creatives will be dismayed by the Government's acceptance of an opt-out system, which I urge the Government to reassess.

The Prime Minister says that our AI safety infrastructure is world leading, but companies are calling for better funding access with better support from the British Business Bank, simpler ways of working with international talent and better infrastructure, from labs to internet access. How will the Government choose where those growth zones will be and ensure the benefits are shared across the UK? How will they ensure that small, innovative start-ups are not left behind?

Innovation must go hand in hand with safety and trust, with the right guardrails in place to promote safety by design. Only by doing so can we lead in quality innovation and ensure the benefits are felt across the UK.

Peter Kyle: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her constructive comments. She mentions trust. Trust is incredibly important in this whole agenda. We have seen too many times in the past where a fearful public have failed to fully grasp the potential for innovation coming out of the scientific community in this country. We are not going to make that mistake. We understand from the outset that to take the public with us we must inspire confidence. We must have safety assured from the outset and that is a commitment I make today. If people are not safe and protected, and do not feel safe, they will not explore confidently all the potential that AI and the digital world presents to them, their families, their communities, their businesses and us as a country. We must ensure that they do so.

On intellectual property, a consultation is under way. The hon. Lady, along with the rest of the public and all interested parties, are very welcome to take part—indeed, I implore them to do so.

Growth zones present the most remarkable opportunity for parts of our country. We want to ensure not just that every part of the country benefits, but that those parts

[Peter Kyle]

of the country that experienced deindustrialisation and suffered at the hands of the Conservative Government over 14 years of stagnation, chaos and the poor strategic planning of our economy, benefit the most. In the coming weeks we will announce the process by which we will select the future AI growth zones. I implore areas, regions and parts of our country that are interested to start looking at the Government's direction of travel to see whether they can play a part, and whether they can get involved and start delivering AI growth zones in their area. There are parts of the country that will really benefit. We want to ensure that we have a set of local authorities and areas that are eager to take advantage of it.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Cities like Stoke-on-Trent, left behind by the previous Conservative Government, could significantly benefit from targeted AI investment. AI growth zones are one such opportunity. We have a great site in Stoke-on-Trent and energy innovations. Will the Secretary of State outline plans for using AI to drive investment towards the CreaTech hub that is Stoke-on-Trent?

Peter Kyle: The people of Stoke-on-Trent are extremely lucky to have such a strong advocate, not just for the infrastructure of the future but for the skills and the talent that exists across Stoke-on-Trent. I can assure my hon. Friend that we are eagerly awaiting any interest that Stoke-on-Trent shows in the growth zone area and in all the other announcements that came out in the plan today. We will not do "to" communities; we will partner "with" communities, areas and the nations of the United Kingdom to ensure that everyone benefits. Those who are hungry to embrace the agenda will have an active partner in my Department and this Government.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): The action plan calls for an AI sector champion in the creative industries, but what the Government really need is a creative industries champion. The Government's copyright and AI consultation, which is so crucial for the creative industries, does not close until 25 February. One option on the table includes maintaining our current gold-standard copyright regime. Why does it seem that the Government have already made up their mind on that consultation? This plan heralds the reform of the UK text and data mining regime to be as least as competitive as the EU's. This plan makes a nonsense of that consultation, does it not?

Peter Kyle: The hon. Lady, unfortunately, does not understand the idea of a consultation. We are open minded and we are listening eagerly to the sector. What I will not do is be forced to make a choice. We have the second-largest creative industries market in the world and the third-largest AI market in the world. This is a gift for a country like ours: two great sectors that are rooted in the future of where global economic prosperity lies. She and the Conservative party want us to make a choice between one or the other. We will not make that choice. On her call for a Government champion for the creative arts, we have one: the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant). I sit alongside him and am very grateful to do so.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): Small businesses and start-ups are vital to the local economy in my constituency and throughout the UK. Can the Secretary of State explain how his AI action plan will help those small businesses to seize the opportunities of AI, and deliver the growth that we desperately need across the country?

Peter Kyle: The people and businesses of High Peak have a great champion in my hon. Friend, and as such they will be able to reap the rewards. We need all parts of the economy to embrace digital technology fully in a digital future, and to do so with confidence. The Office for Budget Responsibility said some time ago that if businesses across Britain did do so equally it would add 0.5% to productivity, which would mean £27 billion of fiscal headroom for the Exchequer. We have set about doing so because that is how we can break out of the inheritance from the Conservative Government of high tax and low growth. We want to invest in that future, and small businesses will be at the forefront. The great thing about AI and digital technology is that it puts into the hands of small businesses the kind of power that to date has only been within the reach of large businesses. This is a huge opportunity, and I hope that people running small and medium-sized enterprises across the country will grab it with both hands.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): This morning the Prime Minister spoke about the Government's wish to develop a clear and trusted copyright regime, which is, I believe, what many in the creative industries thought we already had. When the Secretary of State comes to consider Matt Clifford's recommendation for reform of the text and data mining regime, will the consultation include consideration of potentially strengthening intellectual property protection rather than weakening it?

Peter Kyle: The right hon. Gentleman is a persistent advocate of the issue that he has raised, but let me gently say to him that if the current legal regime were so satisfactory, there would not be so many outstanding court cases concerning that precise issue; it is clearly struggling to keep up with the time in which we are living. We want to ensure that, yes, we do strengthen the rights of the people who use the creative industries and all the great potential that that has for individual copyrighted material, and we want to strengthen that into the future, but also to get it right for the future. That is why we are thinking about the needs, demands and opportunities of the future, and making sure that the settlement for those creating digital, AI and creative industry products and services benefits them equally as we go forward, and that they have the assertion of the law.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I am equally excited by the opportunities that being a leader in AI can bring to the people of the UK. As my right hon. Friend will know, Milton Keynes has been a leader from its outset. We have Bletchley Park, the birthplace of machine learning and AI, but Milton Keynes businesses are leading as well, especially in arts, services and transport. The heart of our security services efforts is based there, as is our skills base between the South Central institute of technology, Cranfield university and the Open university. Will my right hon. Friend meet me, and other AI champions from Milton Keynes, to come up with actions to make this plan a reality for the people there?

Peter Kyle: I have visited Silicon Valley three times in the past year, and one of the things I have noticed is that the constituent parts that make it so magical when it comes to innovation and the upscaling of it exist here in the UK, but we are not bringing it together and using it in the right way. My hon. Friend has just identified many of those constituent elements in Milton Keynes, and they have a great champion in her, because they need to be co-ordinated better to fully exploit the opportunities of the future. I hope that, along with this Government and my Department, I can be the partner that she needs, and I look forward to meeting her and her stakeholders.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I very much agree with the sentiments of the Secretary of State about the opportunities that AI presents, including those that it presents to my constituents, but with any opportunity often comes risk. Can he update the House on any conversations he has had with colleagues from the Home Office about ensuring that police are properly trained, equipped and resourced to deal with crime that is brought about through, for instance, deepfakes, misinformation or disinformation?

Peter Kyle: The hon. Lady has raised a very good point. I can assure her that we are indeed in touch with the Home Office, as we are with every frontline public service department, to ensure that AI is used and the potential is embraced. However, as I said earlier, safety and protection must be the first step, so that the public can be reassured that we are using this technology wisely and in their interests.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. Future AI will be essential to the future of our public services, particularly in improving productivity. Can he say exactly what the Government will do to assist our public services to take advantage of the opportunities that AI offers?

Peter Kyle: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The thing about AI is that it is not a singular technology; it is a general purpose technology. Just in health alone, AI is already being used in hospitals' radiography departments, such as in Huddersfield, to make sure that scanning is more precise. We can detect early patterns quicker, so we get to disease quicker, and productivity is increasing—in Huddersfield's case, from 700 to 1,000 scans a week. Simultaneously, AI is ensuring that doctors' time is used more wisely in the test pilots that we are running. We are using digital technology to create a more human experience, because doctors can spend more time with patients. That is what happens when we use AI and digital technology wisely. It is why we, unlike the previous Government, will not sit on the sidelines and let the market do business as it sees fit. We will use the power of Government, and the agency that comes with it, to ensure that this technology is used for the benefit of all.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I do not know whether the Secretary of State has had a moment to read *The Times* this morning, but it reports that the Chancellor is using a new AI tool to answer her emails. It is 70% accurate and is

“performing as good or better than existing processes”,

which does not say a great deal for the ability of the Chancellor to answer her own emails. Be that as it may, could the Secretary of State please reassure us that any AI tool being used across Government will ensure that any statement brought to the Dispatch Box by the Chancellor is 100% accurate?

Peter Kyle: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are piloting, developing and hoping to deploy AI across Government to drive efficiencies and effectiveness, and to serve the people of this country better than ever before—and certainly better, more efficiently and more effectively than they experienced during the previous 14 years.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): Can my right hon. Friend set out what role he envisages the digital centre of Government will play in driving AI adoption across public services and Departments to benefit my residents in Exeter?

Peter Kyle: The people of Exeter will experience many benefits through this Government's digital technology programme. We have created the digital centre of Government because previously digital services were dispersed across Government. The Government often bought off-the-shelf products and services from big providers, because the capacity did not exist in Government to understand, develop, deploy and program services in-house. We now have a powerful digital centre of Government, which is working alongside tech companies and often developing in-house. I am really excited that in the days and weeks—not months and years—that lie ahead, we will tell the public more about what the digital service is delivering for citizens across this country.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I welcome the Government's ambition in this space, but one area of significant challenge to many tech companies that I have observed and invested in over 20 years has been the ecosystem of investment in the UK. May I urge the Secretary of State to work closely with the Parliamentary Secretary, His Majesty's Treasury, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Emma Reynolds), who is undertaking valuable work on pension reforms, so that we can intensify the understanding in the City of the opportunities that exist in this new sector, particularly at series C and before, where there is a gap? It has a meaningful impact on the growth potential of so many businesses across this country.

Peter Kyle: The right hon. Gentleman raises an incredibly pertinent point, and he mentions one of the great challenges. There are many challenges in this agenda, which is why we are striving so hard to get as much progress as we can. Removing one of the key barriers to not just upscaling innovation, but keeping it in this country, involves making sure that the investment landscape is comprehensive and swift enough—not just at spin out and scale up, but when we get to the point where we need the further rounds of investment that he mentions. Sometimes that is in the hundreds of millions of pounds, and sometimes it takes time to become profitable. Taking that kind of investment risk is essential.

[Peter Kyle]

I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that the Chancellor and my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary are both working intensively on pension reform. We did so in opposition, and we are carrying on with the Mansion House process. We want to make sure that the investment landscape in this country is world class. Right now, we have some work to do, but we are getting there.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I am pleased that today's action plan refers to the expertise and development in AI that already exists in Edinburgh. It is understandable that the Government had to cancel a number of unfunded projects from the last Administration. However, will my right hon. Friend work with stakeholders to ensure that the ambition to develop an exascale computer in Edinburgh is at the heart of the Government's long-term plan and will be brought forward in the next six months?

Peter Kyle: At last, there is a great advocate for a sustainable, fully funded, fully costed compute landscape for our country. That is something we have begun announcing in today's plan, and into the spring I will announce further strategy on compute. I want to make sure that we have the right resilient, sustainable investment that our country needs when it comes to public compute. We have committed today to increasing our public compute by a factor of 20 in the next five years. That shows the scale of our ambition. My hon. Friend can rest assured that when we make announcements on the compute needs of our country, particularly when individual institutions are involved, they will be fully costed, they will be fully funded and they will be delivered.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): People in our world-class creative sector will not be in the least bit reassured by the Minister this afternoon. Our artists face the real prospect of their wonderful works being ingested by AI companies without recompense or even permission. We know that the consultation is ongoing, but what people want to hear is the Minister's intention when it comes to copyright. Can he reassure people who are listening today that our wonderful copyright regime will remain in place at the end of this process?

Peter Kyle: We are already on record as saying that we want more licensing of copyrighted material, not less. The hon. Gentleman's characterisation is a mischaracterisation of the intentions of this Government. The consultation is there, and we want to hear from people. We will deliver a way forward that harnesses all the opportunities of the creative industries into the future, not based on the past. We will allow AI companies to come here and invest into the future. We do not need to pit both sectors against each other. We as a country should celebrate that we have an economy so diverse that we can have the best of both sectors. We can have world-class sectors in both AI technology and the creative arts. That is something that we celebrate, but we seem to be the only party in this House that does.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement this afternoon. I know that he takes this subject really seriously. He was in my constituency just before Christmas,

although it is a shame that he did not go into the PET scanner. I welcome the improvements in terms of education. For the many parents who, like me, have to battle with Google Classroom when they forget the password, I hope AI can resolve that issue.

One of the issues with AI is the mistrust in some communities, particularly black and minority ethnic communities, who worry about what their data will be used for. How will the Secretary of State work with certain communities, including in my constituency and other diverse constituencies, to build up public trust and confidence that their data will be used in an ethical and safe manner?

Peter Kyle: My hon. Friend makes the most important point. I am determined—I have said this publicly numerous times—that equity will be built into the technology and the policies of this Government from the outset. When she reads the reports, when she hears the words of this Government and when she listens to the Prime Minister, I hope she is reassured that this Government want to ensure that everyone from every background not only feels the ability to connect with and work within the tech sector here to create the technology of the future, but benefits equally from the products that come out the other side, including being able to use products intuitively and benefit from the wealth that is created from them. When it comes to using public data, I realise that there are communities in parts of this country that need to be taken on a longer journey and to be more reassured, and I fully commit to doing so as we go forward.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): I welcome this action plan, which mentions data centres. As the Secretary of State may be aware, the Deputy Prime Minister is currently reviewing the need for a data centre in Kings Langley in my constituency.

Both the report and the Secretary of State talk about ensuring that the infrastructure is in the right place. I am working alongside my constituents in Kings Langley, because the proposed site is prime green belt. If there is a need to build on and develop the site, housing would make better sense, because energy—a huge requirement for data centres—is not available nearby. How can the Secretary of State ensure that we are not encouraging the building of white elephants in the wrong places?¹

Peter Kyle: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the energy and other constituent needs of data centres are, at last, being taken into account in strategic planning in our country. We have created the AI Energy Council, which is jointly chaired by the Energy Secretary and me, and the planning reforms will mean that we can expedite investment in data centres.

The hon. Gentleman should be aware that data centres are not a singular investment, but that other innovations, industries and businesses often cluster around them. He mentioned heat, and community heat networks often stem and flow from such investments, if there is the right local leadership, if there is planning in place and if there is the vision to make sure that our country benefits the most.

We have that vision, and I implore the hon. Gentleman to start getting involved with the local issues to shape what unfolds for the digital infrastructure of the future,

1.[Official Report, 15 January 2025; Vol. 760, c. 4WC.](Correction)

so that it benefits absolutely everyone. This is a potential source of sustainable, good-quality wealth creation and job creation into the future. I suggest that his party gets on board and grabs it with both hands, rather than talking down the agenda we are putting forward today.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I am delighted that Vantage Data Centres is working to build one of Europe's largest data centre campuses in Wales, and plans to invest over £12 billion in data centres across the UK, creating 11,500 jobs. This is, of course, great news for our Government's economic growth mission. Can the Secretary of State therefore provide some insight into what this will mean for areas like my Monmouthshire constituency?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful that my hon. Friend can already see the benefits from this investment, because she is positive and is engaging and thinking deeply about the potential benefits. Incidentally, this investment is happening right now—not in the future, but right now. She will be best placed to help steer it for the benefit of all. The people of Monmouthshire are very grateful to have her, just as we are very grateful to have her in the House, as a champion for these issues.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I revert to the article in *The Times* mentioned by my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp), headlined: “Rachel Reeves using AI to reply to Treasury emails”.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Even if the right hon. Gentleman is quoting from a newspaper, I would prefer it if he did not use the Chancellor's name.

Sir Julian Lewis: I beg your pardon, Madam Deputy Speaker. I did not want to misquote the headline.

Nevertheless—as we now all know who she is—I discover that, instead of corresponding with her civil servants, as I thought, I am engaging with something called a “correspondence triage automation tool”, which is used for

“the automatic matching of correspondence with appropriate standard responses”.

That might give us cause to chuckle, but can we at least have an assurance that when we write to Ministers, even if they are not replying, they will at least be informed of the fact that concerns have been raised by Members of this House?

Peter Kyle: I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that Ministers are fully engaged in corresponding with Members across the House. Having been a Back Bencher for so long in opposition, I can assure you that I strive to be a lot better than what I experienced during so many of those years.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Can I just remind the Secretary of State that we do not use “you” in the Chamber? Please can questions and answers be brief? I would like to get everybody in before 6 o'clock.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State and his team for their vision and leadership on this critical issue. These exciting plans could help us to drive growth, create jobs and improve public services. Places like Peterborough could be at the

heart of the silicon fens if we get this right. Critical to that will be the issue of skills in cities like mine—cities that were left behind for too long by the previous Government. Can the Secretary of State update and inform us on what progress his Department is making on assessing the UK skills gap when it comes to AI, and how we can ensure that growth benefits all parts of the country as we embark on this plan?

Peter Kyle: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He said, “if we choose to”. This Government do choose to, and that means engaging with the Education Secretary on the skills agenda, and being determined to ensure that every community across the United Kingdom has equal access to the technology's potential.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): The Secretary of State is a constituency neighbour, so he will know that the convergence of the AI expertise at the University of Sussex, sustainable power from Rampion wind farm and computer power expertise from Universal Quantum, based in Haywards Heath, creates an ideal ecosystem for supporting the UK Government's ambitious AI strategy. Does he agree that our corner of Sussex is a strong contender to be a hub for sustainable AI development? Will he meet me to discuss those opportunities?

Peter Kyle: It will not surprise the hon. Lady or the House to hear that I agree with championing Sussex. I went to the University of Sussex myself; I am an alumnus. Its AI research centre was established in the 1960s. That shows just how long scientific endeavour in digital technology has been in full flow in this country. Of course, I look forward to meeting the hon. Lady, perhaps down in sunny Sussex.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): AI offers immense potential for driving economic growth, but it also presents challenges for post-industrial areas, such as my constituency of Burton and Uttoxeter, including the risk of job displacement, skills shortages and infrastructure gaps, as well as concerns around public trust and the impact on communities. How are the Government addressing those challenges to ensure that AI delivers highly skilled sustainable jobs and long-term benefits to regions like mine in the midlands?

Peter Kyle: I assure my hon. Friend that the communities that he refers to are at the front and centre of the way that we envisage using the power of Government to steer this technology for the good of all. It is essential that communities like his benefit. In the past, wave after wave of revolution negatively impacted such communities, but that will not happen on our watch.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I make no apology for returning to the vital question of copyright. Notwithstanding the consultation, the plan recommends that we follow Europe in having an opt-out model. Does the Secretary of State not agree with me and the News Media Association that that would be a watering down of our exemplary copyright laws?

Peter Kyle: We put forward proposals as an entire package, which we are consulting on. The hon. Gentleman references one part of the package. If he looks at it as a whole, he will see that we are striving to take care of all the competing challenges, because of the benefits and opportunities for modern Britain.

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that AI is not going away? It is therefore best for the UK to lead development and best practice, so that AI systems are safer for my constituents in Wolverhampton North East.

Peter Kyle: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This technology is not going away. The choice this Government have made is not to sit on the sidelines, as the Conservative Government did for the last 14 years. We will safely positively explore all the potential that AI has for our country, our economy and communities like hers. I am grateful for her attitude towards the statement, because that is the way to ensure that communities like hers benefit greatly from the next wave of industrial progress.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): The Secretary of State makes clear his ambition to make the United Kingdom the frontier home of choice for AI firms, and he hopes to see a significant increase in data centres. I trust that his ambition will be fulfilled. The Republic of Ireland, our neighbour, has been very successful in securing multiple data centres, primarily because of its very competitive corporation tax rate. Is a competitive corporation tax rate the missing component that would bring all this work together?

Peter Kyle: I got to Northern Ireland as soon as I could after my appointment to this job. I have to correct the hon. and learned Gentleman on one point. We have attracted £24 billion of investment in AI in this country since taking office, and an additional £14 billion this week alone. I think that tells the House that the missing ingredient was not what he said it was, but a Labour Government.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): I welcome today's statement, and wholeheartedly support close work with the private sector, and the investments in AI and data centres. Will the Secretary of State say a little more about his work to encourage more small businesses to benefit from AI, and will he consider Reading as a potential hub?

Peter Kyle: I really look forward to Reading getting involved, and to it offering to partner with us. We want to get investment into great places like Reading, which has a lot of great small businesses. Small businesses in communities up and down the country could benefit the most. They might sometimes feel like they are tucked away, but they can enter the global stage because of the technology that is before us. The Government's job is to ensure that the infrastructure is there, and that all the technology is as accessible to small businesses as it is to big companies.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): We should be under no illusion: the U-turn on a supercomputer is exactly that. We committed £1.3 billion to it; Labour cancelled it. Can the Secretary of State tell the House how much money has been set aside to achieve his supercomputer ambitions?

Peter Kyle: I admire the way the Conservatives just push through with this. They did not commit a single penny to a single one of the projects that the hon. Gentleman mentions. They want all the benefits of our Budget,

but will not say how they would pay for them. He is actually asking me to cut £800 million, or £1.3 billion, of revenue—perhaps cut thousands of research grants to universities and PhD students—to pay for a project that the Conservative Government announced but did not commit a single penny to.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): The Secretary of State mentioned the benefits to industrial communities such as Stockton North. Does he agree that the commitment to artificial intelligence will lead to more investment in data-intensive heavy industries, such as chemicals and life sciences? I warmly invite him to visit the Billingham chemicals cluster in my constituency if he wishes to see industrial AI in action.

Peter Kyle: My hon. Friend could not be more right. Not only will AI improve the investment landscape for physical infrastructure but it will mean profound technological advances in all sorts of industries, including those that are chemistry dependent. I am so glad that those industries have an MP who recognises that, is on their side, and is sticking up for them today in the British Parliament.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): It is clear that AI brings great opportunities, as well as some dangers. Nowhere is that more clear than in the military realm, where, to put it simply, an algorithm can help us make a decision about who to kill, and the quicker we do that, the more of an advantage it gives our side. On the other side of the ledger, if we kill the wrong person, our entire legal and ethical framework for how we conduct war disappears. Will the Secretary of State give the House a broad outline of his discussions with the Ministry of Defence on this important international issue?

Peter Kyle: The hon. Gentleman raises an incredibly important point. I assure him that we have a world-class defence industry in this country, world-class defensive capabilities in the Ministry of Defence, and a Government who are determined to ensure that not just digital technology and AI but all evolving technology is used ethically and appropriately in the defence of our nation. I also assure him that the Prime Minister has written to each Government Department asking for their plans on digital progress and safely harnessing the power of digital technology, and that my Department and the Ministry of Defence are in touch.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): At the risk of disagreeing with some of my colleagues, it is surely Mid Cheshire that is leading the way on AI innovation in the north-west; we have a number of companies working on game-changing applications. Safety Shield Global in Winsford won a King's award for enterprise for its AI model, which has been 10 years in the making and is keeping construction workers safe on sites all over the world. The action plan talks about the potential of post-industrial constituencies such as mine to act as AI growth zones—key drivers for regional growth. How can areas work with the Government to get AI growth zones up and running, and how soon does he expect them to be operational?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for sharing that example from his constituency. In the coming weeks, we will release details of how local communities can get involved and apply to become AI growth zones; I really look forward to seeing his.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): Over the summer, the UK Labour Government cancelled £1.3 billion-worth of investment in tech and AI projects, including £800 million for the next-generation exascale supercomputer at the University of Edinburgh. The UK Government described the project as making “little strategic sense”, yet today they have pledged to turbocharge AI, including through plans to build a brand-new—wait for it—supercomputer. There is to be new investment; given that the University of Edinburgh has been at the centre of research and development of AI for more than 60 years, will the new supercomputer be located in Edinburgh?

Peter Kyle: I will make the basic point again, because I think the hon. Gentleman needs to hear it again: I could not cut something that did not exist. I have extended the life of the existing supercomputer for another year, so that people have the reassurance that the capabilities needed are there, via the University of Edinburgh. In that time, I have been working on a strategy that will have resilience because it will be fully costed, fully planned and fully funded, so that from spring, when the strategy will be released, those who need to know the strategic opportunities in our country will have the certainty that they need, now and for the long term.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): A barrier to the growth of data centres for AI is their need for power. Rolls-Royce in Derby is at the forefront of small modular reactors and micro-reactors. SMRs are small enough to be on or next to data centre sites, and micro-reactors are the size of a shipping container. Co-location would mean less vulnerability to grid failure and cyber-attacks. Will the Secretary of State work with the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero to explore whether this could be the clean energy solution needed to support sovereign AI capabilities?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s very pertinent question. Investment is going into new sources of energy from investors around the world. I am really pleased that we have Rolls-Royce, which I visited just before the election, up in Coventry. I saw some of Rolls-Royce’s capabilities and heard some of its ambitions. I assure her that the AI Energy Council, which I chair jointly with the Energy Secretary, will take into consideration these sorts of issues, and ensure that the Government engage with those innovations. We want to ensure that we are at the forefront of not just data infrastructure but all the related industries from which our country can benefit.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Given that AI capability will seemingly be used positively, can the Secretary of State explain how the plan will advance areas such as healthcare? Does he see it as a way of reducing backlogs in the NHS, including in waiting lists and booking systems, and can he confirm that all regions of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland will play their part and benefit from AI?

Peter Kyle: I am always grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his contributions, and have enjoyed working with him in opposition and now in government. AI has enormous potential for the health service; it could improve productivity, bring about innovation, and advance treatments and medicine. I assure him that we are

striving for that. The Health Secretary and I are making many visits together to try to understand how we can work together to ensure that technology is developed and implemented throughout the NHS. I have been in touch with the Northern Ireland Assembly on the way forward, and on how the Administration in Westminster can partner with the Northern Ireland Government and ensure that Northern Ireland benefits. I know that there are challenges with the waiting lists there.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): I join the Secretary of State in praising Matt Clifford, who has produced a top-class report. When building data centres for training AI models, two things are needed: lots of energy, and ideally, cold weather. Fortunately, Scotland has both of those in abundance, so will the Secretary of State ensure that one of the AI growth zones is in Scotland?

Peter Kyle: I am not going to engage on the weather, coming from Brighton, which is the sunniest mainland city in the UK, but I thank my hon. Friend for letting me get that on the record. I assure him that we want all parts of the United Kingdom to benefit. I was in touch with the Scottish Government Finance Minister just last week. I am determined that all parts of the United Kingdom benefit, and that fully includes Scotland. Scotland is lucky to have him here championing its cause and celebrating its potential.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): Progress in this area will be incredibly energy dependent. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to speed up the roll-out of small and advanced modular reactors to meet that demand? Given its history, skillset and location, Hartlepool presents a perfect opportunity for this type of investment.

Peter Kyle: I assure my hon. Friend that we are striving to ensure that innovation of all kinds is expedited. That is why I established the regulatory innovation office in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. We are already piloting four areas of policy so that we can get innovation off the drawing board and into the economy, benefiting the health and wealth of the nation as quickly as possible. I assure him that we are wasting no time to get that done.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement. As he said, the AI revolution is taking place now, and it will make significant improvements in the promotion of public services and businesses. However, would he reassure my constituents in Wolverhampton West on what specific steps he will take to ensure that AI is safe in every possible way?

Peter Kyle: The work of the AI Safety Institute is ongoing, and it does world-class work. Of course, AI is fuelled by data, and we know that the public need reassurance that data will be used safely. With a data Bill going through, and with a Government that want to ensure people have the rights they need to have control over their data, I want to assure my hon. Friend on the use of data, technology and AI, as well as on the use of algorithms, which are increasingly being used in the private sector, but also in Government. Unlike the previous Government, I want to ensure that algorithms

[Peter Kyle]

are published by Departments so that everybody can understand what it is that we are doing in their interests to benefit the country, because without understanding it, people will not feel safe with it being used. I will not tolerate that because we need to ensure that we as a country use this technology for the public good.

Mr Mark Sowards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's leadership on AI—it is good to have someone taking this seriously. As somebody who was teaching a year ago, I am always interested in the application of AI in the classroom, especially when it comes to reducing teacher workload so they can spend more face-to-face time with their students. I am also interested in the application of AI in creating personalised learning resources for students based on their ability. Will the Secretary of State speak about that in more detail and potentially tell us about the timelines for rolling this out in our schools?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful that my hon. Friend has brought his experience from the classroom into the Chamber and into debates such as this one. As somebody who has experienced neurological challenges and barriers to learning as a child and through life, one of the most exciting parts of the digital and AI revolution that is unfolding is that, if we harness this correctly, a single classroom can exist both for students who have barriers to learning and for others who have specific talents that need stretching and challenging. Of course, there is no replacement for great teaching and the people and teachers in the classroom working with students, but with the assistance of digital technology and with what AI can do to provide a granular, detailed and tailored experience for students, that is something we are working on. My Department is working with the Department for Education so we can get this technology into classrooms and, as he says, for the benefit of all students right around the United Kingdom.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): On Friday, I visited a major National Grid upgrade project in my constituency, which will connect to a huge new data centre in north-west London. The Secretary of State has talked about the additional energy infrastructure needed, but how will he work to speed up the planning system, including taking on those who seek to block this critical new infrastructure, so that we can harness the benefits?

Peter Kyle: We certainly saved a great question for last. We are absolutely determined about the plan we have put forward today, and let me express my gratitude one final time to Matt Clifford for doing the report. To fully embrace this technology, we need to get a lot right. We need to get regulation and planning right. We are already undertaking a huge reform of our planning system—the biggest for well over a generation. That will include the ability for Government locally and centrally to ensure that investment into industries and infrastructure of the future is expedited and that it faces no barriers, so it can be put to the common good for our country and its citizens without delay.

Live Events Ticketing: Resale and Pricing Practices

6.5 pm

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement about ticketing in the live events sector.

In the words of the musical “Hamilton”, there is nothing quite like being “in the room where it happens”.

I would hazard a guess that every single one of us here can remember the first time we went to a live event. My first rugby international was Wales versus Scotland at Murrayfield aged 12—the food was terrible. My first live gig was U2’s “The Joshua Tree” at Wembley arena. These moments of shared passion are part of what makes us the people we are. As Gloria Gaynor said,

“There’s nothing to compare to live music, there just isn’t anything.”

No wonder live events are so highly prized.

But for far too long, ticket touts have leached off fans’ passion. In the past, it was spivs in long raincoats at the gates. Nowadays it is a trade made all the more pernicious by the internet, which enables modern-day touts, hiding behind multiple false identities, to hoover up tickets and sell them at vastly inflated prices. It is indefensible. It trades off other people’s hopes and does not return a single penny to the artists, the performers, the venue, the industry or the sport. We said we would tackle this, and that is precisely what we are doing.

On Friday, the Department for Business and Trade and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport published a consultation on the resale of live event tickets and a separate call for evidence on pricing practices in the live events sector. It is not a consultation on whether to act; it is a consultation on precisely how we should act. The UK has a world-leading live events sector. Our artists, festivals and venues bring joy to audiences across the country. Last year, the sector employed over 200,000 people, contributing to local economies up and down the country, from stage technicians and sound engineers to venue staff and promoters. Every event—whether a major stadium event or an intimate gig at a grassroots venue—injects life into local communities and economies, supporting small businesses and generating significant revenue for our towns and cities. It is musicians, performers and athletes who make the events what they are and who create the value that sits behind them, not the ticket touts.

Live events are a catalyst for creativity, too, where artists have a platform to hone their craft and relate directly to audiences, as well as to earn a living. Live performances create unforgettable shared experiences that transcend cultural and social boundaries, uniting communities up and down the country and shaping our national identity. However, too many fans are missing out on opportunities to experience those live events. Put simply, the ticketing market is not working for fans.

The Government recognise that a well-functioning ticket resale market can play an important role—for instance, allowing those who cannot attend an event to give someone else the opportunity to go in their place. But far too often tickets are listed on the resale market

at extortionate prices, many multiples of the face value. Just one example: standing tickets for Charli XCX's current UK tour were originally priced at £54, but they have been listed on ticket resale sites for as much as £400. That is enough, as she herself would put it, to

"Shock you like defibrillators".

So-called scalping is the work of organised touts, who systematically buy up tickets in bulk on the primary market then resell them to fans at hugely inflated prices. The Government are committed to putting fans back at the heart of live events and clamping down on unfair exploitative practices. In doing so, we want fairness for fans and an economically successful live events sector. We made a manifesto commitment to act on this issue, and that is precisely what we will do.

That is why we have launched a consultation as the first major step towards delivering on this ambition. We want to act in an effective and responsible way, ensuring that any new protections work for fans and the live events sector. The consultation outlines a range of potential options to address ongoing problems. We are revisiting the recommendations from the Competition and Market Authority's 2021 report on secondary ticketing that were not taken forward by the previous Government. They include a licensing regime for resale platforms, new limits on the number of tickets that individual resellers can list, and new requirements for platforms to ensure the accuracy of information about tickets listed for sale on their websites.

We are also keen to tackle scalping—that is to say for-profit resales of tickets above face value. That is why we are considering a statutory price cap on ticket resales, as seen in many other countries. Its purpose would be to break the business model of organised touts by prohibiting resale at vastly inflated prices. In the consultation, we ask how a price cap should be designed and implemented, so as to deliver a genuine sea change in the ticketing landscape to the benefit of fans and the live events sector, and whether it should be face value only, or plus 10%, 20% or 30%.

There is one other aspect—we might call it "the Oasis moment"—on which we are seeking evidence. The live events sector has adopted new approaches to selling tickets in recent years, including the use of new pricing strategies, and technologies such as dynamic pricing. I want to be absolutely clear: not all dynamic pricing is harmful. Fans often take advantage of early-bird tickets and last-minute price reductions—that is absolutely fine and we have no intention of stopping it. The key thing is that fans are treated fairly and openly, with timely, transparent and accurate information presented ahead of sales.

To better understand these changes and the challenges faced by fans, we are publishing a call for evidence on pricing practices in the live events sector. The consultation and call for evidence will be open for 12 weeks. We strongly encourage all interested stakeholders—fans, artists and performers, ticketing platforms and the wider live events sector—to respond. Once the consultation is complete, we will decide on next steps, but the House should be no doubt that we intend to act.

We have a world-class live events sector in the UK, but we do not have a secondary ticket market to match. In the words of T. Rex:

"It's a rip-off
Such a rip-off".

To the fans, the performers and the touts, let me be crystal clear: we will clamp down on unfair practices in the secondary market. The question is not whether but how we improve protections for fans. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Minister.

6.12 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for advance sight of his statement. As he said, dynamic pricing is a strategy used across many industries outside the creative sectors, including by hotels, taxis and airlines. It can offer significant benefits for consumers when prices are low—for example through early-bird tickets or late ticketing.

The Government are right to emphasise the importance of transparency. Oasis fans know—I am one of them—that we did not have the necessary information up front, and I understand that the Competition and Markets Authority is rightly investigating that episode. However, it is my view that new regulations should be considered only when they are necessary and proportionate and do not duplicate existing rules. Current legislation already states that although dynamic pricing is legal, it must be implemented transparently. I can assure the Minister that we will carefully consider any proposals that could strengthen, improve or simplify the market for fans, but I warn him that we will oppose regulation introduced for the sake of introducing new regulation.

The secondary ticket resale market plays an important role for artists, fans and venues. It can provide a safer way to transfer unwanted tickets, ensuring that seats in venues are not left empty. The Minister claims that his reforms will better protect fans, improve access to live events and support the creative sectors. He claims that the proposals will give power back to fans and prevent them from being fleeced by ticket touts. We know that that is not true, however. We know that Labour's plans will harm fans and venues, and make live events even harder to attend. *[Interruption.]* The Minister wants to know so I will tell him.

Let us first discuss price caps on resale tickets. The Government's consultation proposes capping ticket resale prices to somewhere between the original price and a 30% uplift. That may seem on the surface like a reasonable measure, but we know that it will lead to an upsurge in black market activity and to more money flowing into the pockets of ticket touts. In fact, price controls would lead to a surge in unregulated and illegal transactions, leaving fans with little to no consumer protections. The Minister might not believe me, a free-marketeer, but in response to Government's consultation, the Computer and Communications Industry Association, warned that

"Draconian regulation, targeting only the secondary market, will only mean more tickets changing hands in informal settings without the same protections that exist in proper marketplaces."

I regret to say that the Government's proposed measures to increase the regulation of resale websites and apps, and to raise fines for rule violations, will not prevent fans from turning to underground markets. We have already seen that in Victoria, Australia, where a 10% profit cap failed to prevent significant mark-ups on ticket prices, and even led a spike in the number of ticket scams. We know that scams are already a serious issue in the

[Saqib Bhatti]

secondary ticketing market. For example, and as the Minister will be aware, Lloyds Bank estimates that Taylor Swift fans lost £1 million in ticket scams ahead of her tour. If his policy had been in place, how much more would fans have lost to scammers?

We know that a ticket resale cap will lead to empty seats and the prevent spontaneous ticket purchases. We saw that at the Paris Olympics, where restrictions on the resale of tickets left empty seats at many venues. Empty seats are bad not just for artists, but for the economy. Events at stadiums and venues provide a boost for local businesses, including restaurants, bars and other hospitality venues. Let us be clear: the hospitality industry is already under a lot of strain, not least because of the Budget of broken promises. Labour's national insurance jobs tax, and its slashing of reliefs, have led the Music Venue Trust to warn that many businesses are at

"immediate risk of closure, representing the potential loss of more than 12,000 jobs, over £250 million in economic activity and the loss of over 75,000 live music events."

Let us be clear: the reason we are here today is that the spin doctors in No. 10 are trying to move the news cycle away from a beleaguered Prime Minister, a Chancellor already drowning in the debt markets, and an anti-corruption Minister being accused of corruption. All the while, the Government and the Department are throwing creative industries and hospitality businesses under the bus.

Chris Bryant: Lordy, lordy, lordy! The hon. Gentleman says that he is an Oasis fan, but to be honest given how he talks about the last Tory Government, I think he must be a Nirvana fan—because everything was absolutely perfect when he was a Minister, wasn't it?

Let me first put something right. The hon. Gentleman seems to think that our call for evidence on dynamic pricing is about all sorts of different industries, but it is only about the live events sector. We are not talking about the tourism industry, hotels, taxis or anything like that; we are talking solely about the live events sector. We recognise that that was not part of our manifesto commitments, so we want to hear people's evidence and whether we need to take further measures.

One thing that I can say confidently is that it seems horribly unfair for someone logged into the system to see the ticket price going up—£120, £125, £130, £135—because that creates a sense of panic that they must buy one. It is perfectly legitimate to consider whether that is a good way of selling tickets and whether it is fair to consumers. That is a legitimate question to ask. I cannot comment on the Oasis situation; the hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well that the Competition and Markets Authority is investigating that.

Let me correct the hon. Gentleman's other point. He kept saying, "We know that" this, that or the other will happen. Well, we do not know, for a start, but more importantly, let me explain to him what we are really trying to tackle. It is the thing where, say, Becky, who lives in flat 23, No. 75 High Street, is desperate to get two tickets to see her mum's favourite band on her mum's birthday later that year. She is absolutely desperate, so she tries and tries again to log on at 9 o'clock. She cannot manage to get into the system, but can see the tickets selling. At 20 past 9, all the tickets are gone but

then—lo and behold—at 21 minutes past 9, they are available on the secondary ticketing market for vastly inflated prices. That is what we are trying to tackle. It is a very simple problem.

The hon. Gentleman referred to just one country, but loads of places around the world—France, Italy, Ireland, Poland, Portugal, Norway, Japan, Belgium, most of Canada, most of Australia, Israel, and several states in the United States—have simple measures in place. We want to ensure that we tackle that very simple problem. In the end, the value is created by the artists themselves and by the passion of the fans. It should not go into pockets that are not, in the main, based in this country and certainly have not contributed anything to the creation of that value in the first place.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): Having campaigned on this issue for over 15 years, I have reached three main conclusions. First, the cap on resale should be set as low as possible—for example, face value plus 5% or 10%—to take the incentive out of scalping, or else we should simply follow the Irish model and prohibit resale for profit altogether.

Secondly, many touts and resale sites are based overseas, so legislation must be supranational. Finally, any crackdown on the black market must be fully enforced, unlike in the current situation where prosecutions are few and far between: there have been a handful—six at most. Does the Minister agree?

Chris Bryant: I agree that my hon. Friend has campaigned on the subject for 15 years, because I have heard nearly every speech she has made on it, and she has been absolutely magnificent over the years. I pay tribute to her. Many artists in this country will be grateful for her work because so often they are caught in a completely invidious situation as they see tickets going for preposterous prices. I looked earlier at StubHub, which is selling Dua Lipa tickets for Wembley on 20 June with a face value of £81.45 for £2,417. For Jimmy Carr at Milton Keynes in two days' time, Viagogo has tickets with a face value of £60 for £202. That is the problem that we must deal with.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right about supranational issues; this problem does not just apply in the UK. It is difficult for us to prevent these people from selling tickets for Olivia Rodrigo concerts in Mexico, but we can ensure that measures do apply for Olivia Rodrigo concerts in the UK. She is also absolutely right about enforcement. That is why we are looking at whether there should be a licensing regime and, if so, precisely how that should work. She has made this point in many speeches—I will reiterate it for her: we have hardly seen any prosecutions whatever under the complex set of rules that there are at the moment, and that is one of the things that we have to fix.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): I add my thanks to the Minister for advance sight of the statement. It is good to have the Government's next steps to try to support fans, performers and others working in the live events industry laid out in the announcement. We know the huge value of live events in this country,

which make a great contribution to our economic as well as our cultural wellbeing, and it is right that the Government are taking action. Too many fans across the country have fallen prey to sharp practices and touts ripping them off, and the Liberal Democrats are supportive of taking action.

The Liberal Democrats have long called for the implementation of the Competition and Markets Authority's recommendations to crack down on ticket resale. Those recommendations should be leading the Government forward on this issue. Measures such as capping ticket resales are important. Can the Minister provide greater clarity on the Government's intentions in that regard? Will he suggest what cap on ticket resales the Government would favour at the moment and what new powers of enforcement they will give to trading standards and the CMA? Beyond those measures, will the Government consider being more ambitious by, for example, giving consumers more control by requiring ticket companies to provide accurate information on price increases or answering Liberal Democrat calls to review the use of transaction fees?

I want to be clear that we welcome the Government's looking at the queuing systems used by ticket sellers in both the primary and resale markets and considering measures that could address the current situation, which, as the Minister described, too often feels unfair and arbitrary to those fans on the end of it. Hearing the voices of fans in this discussion is undoubtedly important, so we really welcome the consultation, but fans also want to know that the Government will get on and act to solve these problems. To conclude, may I ask the Minister to inform the House about when fans will start to see some changes being implemented?

Chris Bryant: I welcome the hon. Member to his post and welcome the Lib Dems' support for what we are proposing. There are just a couple of things. He referred to accurate information, which it could certainly be argued is already legislated for but not well enforced. Indeed, when I looked at some of these sites earlier today, it was interesting to see that sometimes the face value was findable, but not at the same time as the price to be paid. We would think it should be mandatory for somebody to be able to see both at the same time, to see whether they are going to be ripped off. I personally do not subscribe to the line that if somebody is prepared to pay £2,417 for a Dua Lipa ticket, so be it. It seems to me that that is effectively the line from Eurythmics:

"Some of them want to be abused";

I do not think that we should adopt that policy at all.

On the point that the hon. Member made about transaction fees, I think that I am right in saying that section 230 of the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024 would already apply to what he is arguing for. If I have got that wrong, I will send him a note.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I note that at one point—it may have been at a particular event—you said that your favourite song was "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" by Cyndi Lauper. She performed at the Royal Albert Hall last year, and I am not sure whether you were there.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I commend the Minister for his astonishing memory.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The statement is hugely welcomed by me, after the disappointment of my private Member's Bill on this subject falling off, and by my constituent Alison Martin, the mum of Coldplay's Chris, who fed into my Bill. Will my hon. Friend the Minister assure me that he will resist the argument about over-regulation of our lives and market forces that we hear "Time After Time" from Conservative Members? We just heard it again. When I was trying to get sign-ups for my Bill, many Conservative Members did not want to know. This is a consumer protection measure—a cap for all our constituents—to stop those bots from hoovering up tickets and hiking up prices. Will the Minister also reiterate that we are not against all dynamic pricing? The price of tickets can go down as well as up, and we do not mind that.

Chris Bryant: I commend my hon. Friend on her private Member's Bill. I told her that we were going to be acting fairly soon so her Bill might not be necessary. She did not believe me, and she ploughed on, but we are intent on acting.

My hon. Friend is quite right about dynamic pricing. I have been involved in a small arts festival in Treorchy in my constituency where we offer early-bird tickets. That is a form of dynamic pricing that I think works for everybody, and we certainly do not want to prohibit that.

My hon. Friend is quite right: much as I like my opposite number, the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti), I find it quite easy to resist him. When I think of the previous Government, I keep thinking of this line from Pink:

"What about all the plans that ended in disaster?"

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I welcome the Government's putting music fans at the forefront of these consultations, although the Minister will know that I would like him to go further and have a full fan-led review of music. Meanwhile, looking at the details of these consultations, it is telling that while Ticketmaster welcomed the resale consultations, it is silent on the dynamic pricing issue. The Minister will recall that Oasis told their fans that dynamic pricing was a "tool to combat ticket touting".

Does he agree that if the Government act decisively to stop large-scale touting from inflating ticket prices, there will be less need for promoters such as Live Nation to have to use dynamic pricing?

Chris Bryant: The hon. Member makes a good point, and it is a delight to be able to agree with her on something in this area at the moment. We might yet have a little bit of a disagreement over copyright and artificial intelligence, but I think that is only because she has misunderstood what we are trying to do. I hope to be able to sit down with her and talk it all through.

We want to ensure that we get the legislation right, and that is why we are doing a consultation rather than just storming ahead with a piece of legislation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) said, there is no point in carrying out any of these measures unless we have a proper system of enforcement.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) for the doughty way in which she has fought this corner for many years. I remember how even back when I was the shadow sports Minister and this was my area, she was campaigning hard on it. This is very much legislation in favour of the fans. We have to remember that, in many cases, the artists realise that their own fans are being priced out of being able to go to their concerts by the practices of these online ticket touts, so legislation is well overdue if we want to make tickets affordable so that true fans can see their favourite bands and artists. I urge my hon. Friend to move ahead swiftly to bring it in.

Chris Bryant: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, and I commend him too, because he has been working on this issue for quite a long time—when he was shadow sports Minister, it was one of the things that he was keen for us to progress. I am joined by the sports Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), and of course one of the ironies is that in some sports, we already implement something remarkably similar, if not tougher. It is perfectly legitimate for us to be moving in a direction that puts those sectors on an equal footing.

I take my hon. Friend's point about speed. I recognise that I did not respond to the question from the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom) about when we will get action. I very much hope that if we get a clear answer from the consultation, we will be able to come forward with plans as a matter of urgency. There must be a King's Speech coming along some time soon.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Continuing the Cyndi Lauper theme, I am sure the Minister agrees that we have to see these touts in their true colours. The fact is that they will try to find ways around these eminently praiseworthy proposals. Let us imagine that the Minister gets his cap in place; what is to stop an undercover operation going ahead with a large number of individuals trying to make a small number of sales each on a website such as eBay? How would the Minister be able to enforce the cap in a situation like that?

Chris Bryant: It is not just about the cap—we are consulting on several elements, one of which is how many tickets an individual seller should be able to purchase. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East, could have argued that some of this is already dealt with in the legislation, but I would argue that the legislation is not clear enough, which is one of the things we need to tackle. If we look at all the different bits of legislation we have accumulated over the years, every time there has been a Bill that my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South has been able to table an amendment to, with support from some magnificent people in the House of Lords, it has been possible to get things through. That is why we may need to do quite a bit of rationalisation of the legislation in this field, but the right hon. Gentleman makes a good point: we will always have to keep ahead of the game.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted by the Minister's statement today. This consultation will be welcomed by the entire

co-operative movement, which has been campaigning to keep fans at the heart of music. Access to culture is such an important part of our country, and our movement stands as the party of the consumer. Does the Minister agree that actions such as taking this consultation forward are the best way to extend access to culture for real fans?

Chris Bryant: Yes, I do. Incidentally, there is another point on which we want to make real progress. We must have not only the massive gigs that everybody loves going to—where you can celebrate with thousands—but very intimate gigs. One of the most special moments is seeing a band perform first in a tiny venue of just 100 or 150 people, and then seeing them in a massive venue, performing at Glastonbury or whatever it might be. We need to look at the whole of the music system in the UK. That means a creative education for every single child—wouldn't it be good if every child had the opportunity to go to live music at least once a year, as well as the opportunity to learn a musical instrument or learn how to sing? Those are all parts of the whole-of-music approach that we need in this country.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): I warmly congratulate the Government on bringing forward these measures, which I wholeheartedly support. I was very surprised by the response from the Conservative Front Bench; I think they have got caught up in some garbled, ill-informed nonsense, but I really hope that in time, they come on board with these proposals, because they are important. For too long, music fans have been ripped off and abused by the touts and scalpers, who have been nothing other than parasites on our live music sector, so I wholeheartedly welcome these proposals.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson), as well as the FanFair Alliance—which has been campaigning on this issue for such a long time—and campaigning newspapers such as the *Daily Record* that regularly feature large articles on it. While we have this in place, I would like to hear more about the proposals on dynamic pricing, which I think is the issue that perplexed music fans more than anything else over the summer. We now have some sort of routeway towards resolving ticket toutting, but we need to hear more about exactly what the Minister will do about dynamic pricing, because that is something that needs fixed.

Chris Bryant: It is always a delight to be able to please the hon. Gentleman—as I think he would confess, that is not an event that happens very often on the Government Benches. I am not sure whether any tickets are available for his music gigs, or whether they are selling at multiple prices, but he has been a doughty campaigner for the creative industries over the years, and I welcome that.

We were very clear in the general election about what we were going to do in relation to the primary issue. We did not make any commitments around dynamic pricing, which is why we are offering a much more tentative approach to that issue. We also know that there are forms of dynamic pricing that work extremely well; when a person buys a last-minute theatre ticket, that is a form of dynamic pricing, because you want to get the theatre full at the end of the day. We want to tread a bit more carefully in that area, which is why we are launching a call for evidence, rather than presenting our proposals

at this stage. If the hon. Gentleman has got good ideas about what we should do, my door is open—do come and talk to us.

Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab): I am made up at today's statement, especially as someone with a music industry background and as a big fan. Dynamic pricing made headlines last summer when Oasis's fans were hit by prices that were two, three, or even four times the face value of the tickets after they had queued for hours and hours. When they got to the payment stage, they had a matter of minutes to decide whether they wanted those tickets. John Robb, the music writer, said that dynamic pricing is

"exploiting people's excitement in the worst possible way"

after Ticketmaster behaved no better than the touts they claim to protect fans from. I welcome the call for evidence about this practice, but can the Minister assure me that it will lead to real action so that fans are no longer ripped off by surge pricing?

Chris Bryant: Just about the first thing my hon. Friend said to me when she collared me in the Lobby after we had won the general election was, "You are going to do something about ticket touts, aren't you?", so I am glad I am able to please her this afternoon. One of the worst things that can happen—I am sure every member of Oasis would say this—is for everybody who has gone through the process of buying tickets to be saying, "Don't look back in anger." [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] Sorry, I had to work really hard to fit that in, but it is a true point. We want the process of buying a ticket to be fair, open and transparent, and for the person buying the ticket to feel that they have got a sane and sensible deal, rather than that they have been ripped off. The problem with the present situation is that all too often, people feel that they have just been ripped off, which undermines the joy and passion of the event.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): Every time the Government propose something that is in the interests of the consumer and the public, I am so excited, so I welcome the Minister's statement. As well as dynamic ticket pricing, where the price of the ticket itself fluctuates—always in the wrong direction—there are high and disproportionate service fees, which can also become

higher during peak times. Does the Minister agree that there is a clear need for transparent pricing for consumers, so that they can see a breakdown before they press "buy"?

Chris Bryant: I agree 100% with the hon. Gentleman about the fees issue. There is an argument that it is already dealt with by section 230 of the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024, but that is why we are consulting on that specific issue. To the ticket touts who have complained about this, I say that in the words of the musical "Chicago", they had it coming—they only had themselves to blame.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his very positive statement, and I believe everybody in the Chamber will be encouraged by what he has announced. He is surely familiar with the Oasis lyrics, which I promise not to sing:

"And so Sally can wait, she knows it's too late as we're walking on by."

Unfortunately for many fans, waiting was not an option, and they were left with the painful reality that dynamic pricing made their wallets melt away. Given reports that fans were subjected to inflated prices through in-demand dynamic pricing, with tickets jumping from less than £150 to over £350 in moments, how will the Minister ensure that ticket sellers—and event organisers in particular—comply with the proposed consumer protection laws, especially those requiring transparency in pricing?

Chris Bryant: I am grateful for the hon. Member's comments, and for his musical rendition. He did not put it into song, for which I should probably be grateful as well, but—I do not know—maybe he has a beautiful high tenor voice.

One of my anxieties about this whole situation is that there have not been very many prosecutions, which is perhaps because the law has been too complicated. However, it may also be because trading standards departments have really struggled in recent years, because they are subject to local authority budget cuts. That is why this, for me, is part of the whole of what the Government are trying to do, which is to put our public services back on a much more solid and secure footing and to bring in legislation that stands up for consumers. However, I am grateful to the hon. Member, and if he has any particular ideas on how we could specifically ensure that there is proper enforcement, not least in Northern Ireland, I would be really grateful to hear from him.

Developing AI Capacity and Expertise in UK Defence

DEFENCE COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): We now come to the Select Committee statement on behalf of the Defence Committee. Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement. These should be brief questions, not full speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee member, not the relevant Minister. Front Benchers may also take part in the questioning. I call Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck.

6.41 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to present this report on behalf of the Defence Committee.

It is important at the outset to say that our report is not focused on the ethical questions that using artificial intelligence in defence raises. That is because noble Lords in the other place completed a very in-depth Committee report on AI in weapon systems prior to our inquiry. In that report, they rightly addressed issues of safety, compliance with international law and the need for a human in the loop. It is also important to say that the key defence documents we refer to throughout our report were produced under the previous Government. However, we have not received any indication from the current Government that they will be making any significant or major departures from those documents.

Our focus was on trying to understand what the Ministry of Defence is doing in this area and how it can develop a successful defence AI sector in the UK. Since 2018, AI has been appearing increasingly in defence documents, as well as being spoken about by Ministers and senior military figures. The defence artificial intelligence and autonomy unit and the defence AI centre have since come into being, and the defence artificial intelligence strategy was published in 2022. Our strong research pedigree in computer science and the availability of computing power could put the UK at a strong advantage, and pillar 2 of our AUKUS partnership continues to present opportunities for working with our allies and for interoperability.

Despite that, we found that, overall, there is a “say-do gap” where the Department is identifying the right priorities, but has been unable to say what steps it will take to achieve them. Rhetoric does not match reality. This leaves us behind our allies and disadvantaged when it comes to our adversaries. Similarly, we consider the Department’s aim to be AI-ready problematic. Technology is evolving at such a rapid pace, and the MOD will never be sufficiently AI-ready. Instead, it should aim to be “AI-native”, with AI viewed no longer as a niche add-on, but as a core component running right through defence. This will take leadership, cultural and practical changes.

AI is a general-purpose technology, and although we do not have a clear idea of the size of our defence AI sector, we do know that it is young and underdeveloped,

and that many of the companies that will supply defence in the future are likely to cut across the civilian and military sectors. For the MOD to give to these less traditional companies and investors any confidence and incentivise them to do business with the MOD, it needs to be clear about what it wants. It needs to show more flexibility, be less prescriptive in requirements, address delays in security clearances and fully embrace the recommendation from the Haythornthwaite review about how the brightest minds can zig-zag between the military and the commercial civilian sectors.

On new capabilities, the MOD is not comfortable with rapid change, risk or experimentation, but that is exactly how our tech companies and start-ups operate. The MOD’s existing approach of contracting with primes and spending 10 to 15 years building a ship, tank or aircraft to exquisite specifications just does not cut it in an increasingly data and software-driven environment. It is welcome that the global combat air programme is being designed with open-system architecture, meaning that software capabilities can be plugged into and taken out of the hardware, and the new spiral model of overall defence procurement in the integrated procurement model is welcome, too. However, our Committee found no evidence of fundamental changes across the organisation. If smaller, innovative companies are to engage with the MOD, the MOD must be a better customer.

Key to developing our defence AI ecosystem is the digital infrastructure, yet the Department’s plan for a digital backbone is behind schedule. Data collection, labelling and sharing, which are all key to training defence AI models, must be improved. Clarity of leadership and responsibility is also needed. The defence artificial intelligence centre is headed by a one-star officer, and we remain unclear on where the centre is based. There is fragmentation across the MOD, as the frontline commands of each service have individual responsibility for AI development, which causes confusion and duplication.

Ukraine has shown us that AI is changing the battlefield. AI has the potential to transform UK defence, from the back office to the frontline. In such a rapidly developing environment, we cannot predict what will come next, but we know for certain that our allies and adversaries are using and developing AI for military advantage. We remain hopeful that through the strategic defence review, and the Government’s focus today on AI, and by adopting our recommendations, the Department will start to turn its rhetoric into reality, so that it does more than it says.

I want to acknowledge what a team effort producing this report has been. I thank the previous Committee; many of its members became firm friends of mine, despite our political differences, and I dearly miss them. I also thank the new Committee, which has worked very hard to finalise this report. I thank everyone who has engaged with us, including the MOD and the previous Minister, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), who is on the Opposition Front Bench. I also thank our excellent Committee staff, especially George James, who managed the inquiry, and Professor Kenneth Payne, our very knowledgeable expert adviser to the inquiry. I look forward to taking any questions from right hon. and hon. Members, and I sincerely hope that they like the answers that they get.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): This is an excellent report, and I am very grateful to the hon. Member for recognising my role, and for her comments about the integrated procurement model and the work that we did in government. She is right that this area of technology is changing at extraordinary speed, and it is having a real impact on the live battle-front in Ukraine.

I make two points. First, the hon. Member said that the House of Lords Committee looked at the ethical issues. I would urge the Commons Committee not to ignore those, because my view is that we need to retain maximum freedom of operation and not be bound by, for example, new definitions of autonomy that may limit our military capabilities.

Secondly, the hon. Lady made a very good point about small and medium-sized enterprises in the civil area that are not involved in defence. We all agree that we want to get them more involved in defence, but may I ask her to look at how we share information, particularly if it is secret, with SMEs, as well as with primes? We were making progress on that when I was at the Department. Perhaps, with the Committee's help, we can look at case studies of civil companies that have successfully got into the defence sector by having a strong link with the centre of the MOD.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I could not agree with the hon. Member more. A section in our report addresses in detail SMEs and their engagement with the Department, and we should carry forward the work that he did in government, especially on the integrated procurement model.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Chair of the Defence Committee.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I place on record my gratitude to my hon. Friend for chairing the Sub-Committee, and I thank members of the previous Defence Committee, and Committee staff, for all their hard work on our report on artificial intelligence—a matter integral to our nation's defence. While I welcome the Prime Minister's announcement today about embracing AI in government, does my hon. Friend agree that there seems to be a chasm between the Ministry of Defence's rhetoric and the reality? In practice, AI is still treated as a novelty, rather than a fundamental part of the MOD toolkit.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the Chair of our Committee for his question, and for his work in getting our report to publication. He is right to highlight the gap between what the MOD wants to do and how it plans to achieve it. That runs through our entire report and is something that the MOD needs to get a handle on. I am sure that he would agree that by implementing our recommendations, the Department can move to a position where AI is threaded through the organisation, as opposed to being a niche add-on, or a novelty.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Military history books are full of examples of the difficulty that defence scientists had in selling their revolutionary ideas to military chiefs and civil servants. Given the nebulous nature of artificial intelligence, was the Sub-Committee satisfied that there is a specialist cadre in the Ministry of Defence that is intellectually equipped to make appropriate assessment of schemes that are put forward for new weapons systems?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: One difficulty was that not all the information that the Sub-Committee wanted was readily available to us, and we still do not have a clear picture of exactly what is happening in the MOD when it comes to artificial intelligence. We recommend more clarity, and that the Department be clearer about the skillsets it needs and the gaps that exist. We should look to implement the recommendations of the Haythornthwaite review, so that those with the knowledge and expertise can zig-zag in and out of the Department.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I commend the work of the Defence Committee. The report is important, particularly given the news that has come from Ukraine in the past few years, and the way that conflict has developed. One thing that comes out clearly is the need to be on the cutting edge of all this. The UN declared 2025 to be the international year of quantum science and technology. Do the developments that my hon. Friend is talking about lend additional credence to the importance of that statement, and of bringing those cutting-edge developments to our defence capabilities?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. Today's announcement from the Government has shown that they are taking AI and its potential very seriously. As our report shows, there are steps that they can take when it comes to defence to ensure that the Department is more AI native and has AI running through it.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Throughout the decades—at least since 1945—the development of defence technology has been bound by international law. I understand that the Defence Committee has taken the view that it will not be informed by law or ethics, but I wonder whether work will be done in future to bring together the House of Lords report from 2023 and the work that the Sub-Committee has done so expertly.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: The hon. Member is right to raise that point, as we very much took note of the noble Lords' report, which is referenced in our inquiry's final report. We urge progress on AI in defence, but on the understanding that the progress is always in line with a strong ethical and accountable framework, and that there is a human in the loop.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for the report, and it was helpful to understand the point about the Lords report. Does she know when the Government will outline the timetable for that report on the ethical and moral issues to be considered, and for those issues to be incorporated in Government policy? How effectively will the MOD work with international companies—this is obviously an incredibly complex area—to ensure that the security risk is massively reduced?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: The hon. Member asks me for answers that are outside the scope of our report. She also asks questions of the Government; I am speaking on behalf of our Committee, and it is way above my pay grade to answer for our Government. However, she raises an important point about the Lords report. I believe that the previous Government responded to the

[Mrs Lewell-Buck]

report from the Lords, but as with everything in defence, what we do will be in line with what our allies and NATO do. We will continue to work with our allies on the global combat air programme and the AUKUS partnership. Everything we do, we do together, not in isolation.

Derek Twigg (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on an excellent report, and on the leadership that she has shown throughout—in dealing with witnesses, considering the evidence that came forward, and compiling the report. As she said, she worked closely with, and was given great help, by our excellent staff on the Defence Committee. I served on that Committee in the last Parliament, and it was probably the best Committee that I have been on, thanks to the commitment and knowledge of defence issues of those involved, including my hon. Friend; we were able to put that to good use. She said that despite differences between parties, the Committee was united in taking issues forward and holding Ministers to account. I am sure the new Committee will do exactly the same. It is great that the new Chair is present to support my hon. Friend, and ensured that we got the report out in a timely manner.

My hon. Friend probably knows what issues I will raise. First, on AI, the defence field is moving so rapidly; it changes almost by the week. Does she agree that it is important that the MOD and those involved in defence harness that change quickly, keep on top of it, and ensure that we lead the field in AI, rather than following all the time? Also, I recall a discussion that we had

about the importance of harnessing the talent and potential of SMEs and start-ups. We should ensure that the UK uses that potential for the benefit of our armed forces, to develop the best possible defence for our country. I would be grateful if my hon. Friend responded to those points.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and all his help on the Committee. It is a joy to be once again serving on the Defence Committee with him. He is correct to say that AI is moving rapidly, and the MOD needs to harness it quickly, because our adversaries are. We know from open source data that we cannot allow ourselves to be behind the curve on this. SMEs have a particular mindset, as my hon. Friend will know. They are happy to have that “fail first”, experimental mindset that the MOD is often not used to. Our report highlights that significant cultural change and leadership is needed in the MOD to get it to a position where SMEs can work better with it for the benefit of our entire defence AI ecosystem.

BILL PRESENTED

RURAL CRIME (STRATEGY) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Ben Maguire presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to establish a task force to produce a strategy for tackling rural crime; to require the Secretary of State to implement the strategy; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time Friday 4 July 2025, and to be printed (Bill 158).

Backbench Business

Hospice and Palliative Care

7 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered hospice and palliative care.

First, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting time to support this important debate, and I thank colleagues from across the House for supporting my application and joining me today to discuss a subject that, to use an old cliché—but in no more apposite a context—is truly a matter of life and death.

When this House debated the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill last November, the crisis in hospice funding and concerns over the provision of palliative care were a constant refrain in the subtext of many of the speeches from supporters and opponents of the Bill. As someone who entered the Chamber that morning undecided as to how I would vote, I became increasingly convinced throughout the five hours of powerful argument and testimony that no matter what the House decided, the time had come to address hospice funding for the provision of palliative care head on, for death is as much a part of life as living.

While as parliamentarians we readily focus on what makes a good life, we rarely consider what makes a good death. It is possible to have a good death, as I saw with my mother, who passed away in comfort at the beautiful Arthur Rank hospice in Cambridge, and with my father, who died in the exceptional palliative care facility at Bellevue hospital in New York. As a family, we remember those times as sad, but cathartic, with moments of laughter as well as tears, as when my father—somewhat confused towards the end of life, but with a glint still in his eye—asked, as I sat next to him stroking his forehead, whether I was a lady friend.

Sadly, however, too many in our society do not experience a good death, and we need to start asking why. The hon. Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) bravely took on that challenge with her private Member's Bill, and I hope that this debate will afford us an opportunity to build on those foundations.

Kim Leadbeater (Spen Valley) (Lab): Does the hon. Member agree that the renewed focus on the hospice and palliative care sector is extremely welcome and overdue? Does he agree that the extra £100 million of investment shows how seriously this Government are taking the issue, showing that people approaching the end of life are fully supported in whatever choices they make?

Mr Kohler: I agree with the hon. Lady, and I will be coming to those points.

Today is not about rehashing the arguments made that Friday, but to allow Members time to discuss and reflect on this separate, but inextricably linked subject. It is not the last word on hospice and palliative care, but an important step in forging a consensus that I hope will unite us, no matter where we ultimately stand on assisted dying.

I began by referencing the crisis in hospice funding. Before I proceed further, I echo what the hon. Member for Spen Valley said and thank the Health Secretary for the £100 million in capital and digital moneys he announced

last month. It will make a profound difference to the sector's current financial position. I have been asked by individual hospices and Hospice UK to convey their genuine gratitude. In a similar vein, the Government's recently announced commitment to extend the children's hospice grant by a further year is deeply appreciated and equally vital to maintaining levels of service in this heartrending, but profoundly important part of the hospice movement. However, these are only short-term fixes and fail to provide the long-term funding and certainty critical to securing the future of the hospice movement.

Currently, only one third of hospice funding is provided by the Government, with the rest coming from charitable sources. That leaves hospices vulnerable to increased cost pressures, as can be seen in a recent Hospice UK survey, which found that at least 20% of hospices had cut services in the past year or were planning to do so. Becca Trower, the clinical director of the wonderful St Raphael's hospice, which provides excellent care to residents in my Wimbledon constituency, was unambiguous when she told me:

"We have a funding crisis and we need to protect our hospice."

Last year, that meant that St Raphael's was forced to strip £1 million from its £6.5 million budget by ending its hospice at home service that provided vital care, advice and support to patients and carers in their own homes. It was a virtual ward, in fact, but not one that fitted within the NHS definition of such, which would have attracted the separate integrated care board funding available for such initiatives. In just one month, the cuts to the service directly impacted 26 patients, many of whom spent their last days taking up valuable hospital beds, dying in the one place they did not want to die and putting further pressure on the NHS. When the Government are aiming to move medicine into the community, it makes no sense for hospices to be forced into a position that achieves the opposite.

That contradiction is mirrored in the current funding settlement, where the Government have given with one hand and taken with the other by increasing employers' national insurance contributions. The refusal to exempt charities will exacerbate the challenges confronting hospices. The amazing Shooting Star children's hospice, for example, provides wonderful support for families in my constituency. It estimates that the change will add another £200,000 to next year's cost base.

Hospices need certainty. Doubts over funding undermine morale and sap energy, making the recruitment and retention of staff another huge issue for the sector. To address these problems, the Government need to introduce a consistent, reliable funding mechanism that reflects the rising costs of care. Hospices consequently need to be included within the NHS's much-anticipated 10-year health plan. In parallel, staffing needs must be addressed in the next NHS long-term workforce plan.

It should not be forgotten that hospices provide a variety of services in addition to palliative care, including emotional, psychological and spiritual support, as well as physio and occupational therapy, practical support, complementary therapies, respite care and bereavement services. Much of that is beyond the clinical, and not something that the NHS can be expected, nor can afford, to provide. That is why no one I spoke to in the hospice movement thought that hospices should be subsumed within the NHS. They provide a complementary

[Mr Kohler]

service that extends well beyond the clinical, and to which a charitable funding model is more effective and appropriate.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman on setting the scene so well. One of the concerns that I and others in the Chamber have is the impact on the workers in hospices. It is not just about the financial implications, which are all part of the overall issue, but burnout. Staff are working long hours. They are volunteers in many cases, and they do that because it is what they are committed to. Does he share my concern that burnout in hospice care will have an impact on the NHS in the long term?

Mr Kohler: I agree with the hon. Member. We need more palliative care specialists and we need more training, and there is a real danger of burnout.

It is not just hospices that provide palliative care. When talking to specialists within and beyond the hospice sector, I have been struck by their commitment to giving patients a good death and their frustration that so many do not receive one. A palliative care doctor recently told *The Guardian*:

“I sometimes see patients...who come into hospital in unspeakable agony and want their lives to end. It is not because their pain cannot be prevented, but because they are not getting the care they need.”

A local oncologist told me:

“Demand for services is simply outstripping supply. The majority of patients are not getting their end of life care wishes met. The specialist palliative care teams are very good but there are not enough of them and they do not have adequate resources.”

Huge regional inequalities exist in the provision and quality of services due to the vagaries of the current funding model. The Health and Care Act 2022 included for the first time a statutory duty for ICBs to provide palliative care. However, it did not include a minimum standard of core provision, leaving it to what each ICB considers appropriate.

Freedom of information requests submitted by Hospice UK in 2023 found that adult hospice funding consequently ranged from just 23p to £10.33 per head of population across different ICBs. For children's hospices, the variations were even starker. Research from the amazing charity Together for Short Lives found that spending per child with a life-limiting condition varied from an average of £531 in Norfolk and Waveney to just £28 in South Yorkshire.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): On the point about the postcode lottery—an oft-used cliché by politicians—I have heard from Hospice UK that, on one occasion, a single gift from a legacy covered the running costs for a hospice in the UK for five years. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is one of the starkest and most extreme illustrations of how the current system is so unbalanced and, from one street to the next, leaves people with such disparities of access to such an important element of healthcare?

Mr Kohler: I agree, and I will come to some solutions that might address this issue. We must increase the core responsibilities of ICBs in this area.

Inevitably, much palliative care is provided not by specialists but by generalists, such as GPs, trainee doctors and community nurses for whom care of the dying is not their primary focus. Many lack the training, time and resources needed to provide what is possible, not through their fault but due to a system that does not regard palliative care as a core function. That is all too evident at the outset of their careers, with one medical student telling me:

“I only received 2 mandatory days training on palliative care in my entire degree. This is simply not enough and we need to increase training across the board to ensure patients are given equal access to high-quality care.”

Since the Shipman case there is unacceptable legal uncertainty, particularly among non-palliative care specialists, about the extent to which analgesics can be given in a sufficient quantity to alleviate pain, even where that might hasten death. The system requires a complete overhaul. We need more palliative care specialists and better training for non-specialists, including robust advice on the legality of giving sufficient pain relief to alleviate suffering, buttressed if necessary and appropriate by more explicit guidance in the Director of Public Prosecutions' code for Crown prosecutors and the Lord Chief Justice's criminal practice directions.

ICBs should be required to provide a minimum level of palliative care as a core function. This would have a transformative effect on how palliative care is funded both within and beyond the hospice sector, rather than leaving it to the generosity of particular ICBs such as South West London and Surrey Heartlands, both of which do all they can to fund local hospices, but within the constraints of a funding model that limits their ability to do so.

In concluding, I want to return to where I began. The debate is a matter of life and death. Ensuring a good death is important not just for the individual at the end of their life, but for those they leave behind. Knowing that someone passed away peacefully can bring real comfort to those mourning their loss. I would like to end with the words of Fleur, whose son received end of life care at the wonderful Shooting Star hospice. She said:

“Hospices are not just places where life comes to a close...they are places where those left behind learn how to keep on living. When my son Toby died, our hospice didn't just care for him—it cared for all of us, to give us a future not defined by trauma, but by love, resilience, and hope. Months later, when my daughter had to step back into a hospital—the place where we had first been told we would lose Toby—she froze, overwhelmed by fear and grief. When she returned to the hospice, the very place where Toby had taken his last breath, she ran inside, kicked off her shoes, and threw herself into the arms of a nurse.”

That is what it is possible to achieve. I hope the Government are listening.

7.14 pm

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): It is an absolute honour to follow the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler), who made a wonderfully poignant speech. I thank him for securing this debate.

As the Member of Parliament for Huddersfield, I have had the privilege of witnessing at first hand the exceptional work of hospices such as Forget Me Not children's hospice and Kirkwood. These organisations are lifelines for individuals and families facing life-limiting conditions. I welcome the recent announcement of the

expansion of hospice funding, which is a crucial step in addressing the financial challenges that these vital organisations face.

Hospices such as Forget Me Not and Kirkwood do not just offer medical care but provide emotional, psychological and practical support to patients and their families. They ensure dignity and compassion at every step of their journey, addressing the full spectrum of needs for those they care for. Steve, a local dad whose son, 10-year-old Ethan, receives support from the Forget Me Not hospice, spoke of its life-changing work for Ethan and the whole family. Steve said:

“When he’s here he’s comfortable, it’s a lovely environment. It’s not clinical and he’s treated like a normal person.”

They are not just care providers but community builders, offering spaces of comfort and support during life’s most difficult times.

Huddersfield University is leading on joint work with local hospices about research and clinical practice in end-of life-care. It includes working with Kirkwood hospice to create a postgraduate certificate in end of life care, the first of its kind in the UK to link with a hospice. While I am sitting next to my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater), I must pay tribute to how she conducted the debate on her Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill. There is no doubt that she has moved the debate on funding for hospice care, and I thank her very much.

The expansion of hospice funding is a significant and welcome development, but we must acknowledge that many hospices, including those in my constituency, still face immense financial pressures. Forget Me Not children’s hospice recently launched an urgent appeal to address a £1 million funding gap. The expansion of funding must be part of a larger, ongoing strategy to ensure that long-term commissioned funding for hospices is part of the 10-year NHS plan.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): St Leonard’s hospice in my constituency lovingly cared for my uncle with extraordinary compassion last year in his final weeks. I hear my hon. Friend’s calls for hospices in her constituency but does she agree that, because of their empathy and the important work that they do, we must all campaign for the funding that our hospices desperately need?

Harpreet Uppal: I absolutely do. I pass on my condolences to my hon. Friend and his family, and pay tribute to the local hospice and the work that it has done to support his family.

I want to raise NHS England’s £26 million funding for children’s hospices—formerly the children’s hospice grant. Traditionally, that funding was distributed centrally by NHS England but last year, as has been mentioned, it was disseminated by integrated care boards. That has caused delays to many children’s hospices’ access to their funding, including Forget Me Not. It is critical that the funding is ringfenced for children’s hospices, and I hope that the Minister will review whether it can again be centrally distributed, to avoid further delays.

The new funding for hospices is an important milestone. I welcome the Government’s approach and thank the Minister for his work. I know that the hospice sector very much welcomes the additional funding, but can it also mark the beginning of further Government support

for these essential services? Hospices are an integral part of our healthcare system, and we must ensure they have the resources and support that they need to continue their vital work, including the specialist doctors and nurses that are needed in many hospices.

Through Government action, community support and the tireless effort of hospice staff and volunteers, we can ensure that hospices not only survive but thrive, continuing to provide the compassion and dignity that every individual deserves.

7.19 pm

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) on securing this debate. As a member of the Backbench Business Committee, I can tell him he made a very convincing argument for this debate.

Like others, I suspect, one of my aims this evening is to praise my local hospices, Lindsey Lodge in Scunthorpe and Saint Andrew’s in Grimsby, which both provide care to my constituents. I have particular affection for St Andrew’s, as my father passed away in its care, and my mother actually died on the day she was supposed to move in. That was more than 30 years ago; I have seen how they have developed in the years since, and they continue to provide absolutely superb care. Of course, demand is increasing: demographics have changed, and people are living longer. Hospices do actually ease the burden on the NHS.

St Andrew’s has 133 permanent staff, but more than 400 volunteers. As it happens, I visited St Andrew’s last Friday—the meeting was scheduled some weeks ago, but it was convenient timing for this debate. I do have a specific question for the Minister relating to St Andrew’s, which I will come to later. Voluntary donations in areas such as north-east Lincolnshire are crucial, as they are elsewhere. However, with relatively low incomes and very low property values, when people leave a legacy of a share in their property, perhaps, that does not realise the same sort of return as it would in many other parts of the country.

I could provide a whole list of what St Andrew’s hospice delivers; instead, I will give one or two significant statistics. It delivers more than 3,000 adult in-patient bed nights and 694 children’s hospice at home sessions; it has physiotherapy, creative therapy and social work contacts; it provides spiritual care for its patients and their families. The cost of operating all parts of the charity in 2024-25 is more than £18,000 a day; only four years ago, it was £14,000 a day—a significant rise, as Members will appreciate. Some 80% of that cost has to be earned or raised by the hospice, which, in times of economic challenge, is increasingly difficult. Its statutory income for ’24-’25 is expected to be only 21.5% of its total income. Currently, for every £1 of statutory income, St Andrew’s has to raise £4.60, posing a considerable financial challenge for the hospice, the volunteers and the fundraisers.

As we know, healthcare inflation runs ahead of general inflation, and hospices have to try to keep pace with statutory salary increases related to the national minimum wage. As with the social enterprises that provide social care in north-east Lincolnshire, hospice staff do not automatically get the increases that go to NHS workers, and the gap is inevitably widening. I raised this matter with the Secretary of State at health questions last week,

[*Martin Vickers*]

and I think it will be a growing problem with further NHS wage increases later this year, as the gap between NHS workers and those providing care in hospices and social enterprises widens; it will be about 10% by the time the next increase comes. Needless to say, that is causing difficulties for those employees.

I have a specific question for the Minister, which I will write to him about in the next day or two—I do not expect him to have all the details of St Andrew's in his pack. St Andrew's gets only 21% of its income through statutory contributions, which I understand is about 12% below the national average; this has come about because of a whole series of historical adjustments. My plea to the Minister is that St Andrew's is brought up to the national average as soon as possible.

7.24 pm

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for securing this important debate. As a nurse for 25 years and as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on hospice and end of life care, hospice and palliative care has always been at the heart of my work, both in this Chamber and in my community.

I start by acknowledging the fantastic decision by the Government to boost investment in hospices by £100 million—the largest funding uplift in a generation. That is a clear sign that the Government are listening to the hospice sector and responding with actions, not just words. However, this uplift must be the beginning and not the end. This new money will not last forever. We must now take concrete steps to ensure that the awful conditions in the hospice sector that we inherited are never repeated. It is worth noting that while the independent commission on palliative and end of life care recently created by my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) is welcome, it will mainly be about delivery and not funding. We simply cannot wait for a palliative care taskforce to complete its report; that could take months, which this sector cannot spare.

In my role, I hear time and again about postcode lotteries and the chronic lack of funding that plagues this vital sector. Through no fault of its own, John Taylor hospice, which does fantastic work in my constituency, is facing a crisis in funding; it has had to announce redundancies and a reduction in in-patient beds due to the funding shortfall. That story is being repeated all over the country—I am sure many Members in this Chamber have a similar situation that they could share. Hospice care still relies heavily on charity, bake sales and donations to fund much of the work that supports families during their most vulnerable moments. That must change. This postcode lottery not only is unfair, but undermines the principles of universal healthcare. We cannot allow end of life care to depend on where someone lives and how much money they have.

Hospices across the UK provide care and support to 300,000 people every year. They are an absolutely essential part of our healthcare system, although they are in the charity sector. Every single day, hospices face rising costs of energy, food and medicine; every single day, they deliver exceptional care, even as pressures mount; and every single day, they battle deficits that threaten their ability to continue. Despite all those challenges,

our hospices save the NHS millions each year by alleviating pressures on hospitals and providing community-based care. However, their ability to continue this vital work is at risk, and they need long-term sustainable support. We need to face the future head on and fix their funding model permanently.

While I absolutely understand that hospices are under pressure, the integrated care boards that fund them are similarly under a great deal of pressure due to year-on-year budget reductions from NHS England. Asking ICBs to find extra money without it being allocated centrally as revenue is impossible.

Death is a part of life, as the hon. Member for Wimbledon said, and as we all know. Nobody would say we should neglect healthcare, so why are we neglecting the hospice sector by not securing a sustainable funding formula? To truly address the gaps in our system, we need a sustainable funding model that ensures hospices can meet growing demands without being forced to cut services. The people of this country deserve a future where every family, no matter their circumstances, can access the highest quality of end of life care without worry, one where hospice care is not a postcode lottery but a promise.

Let us turn this moment into an opportunity. We must act urgently to implement and improve a sustainable funding package for hospices and palliative care. With constructive action, we can build a system that uplifts the most vulnerable among us, strengthens the NHS and shows the best of what we can achieve as a nation. Let us ensure that the legacy of this debate is not one of uncertainty, but one of determination and passion, and that when we see the 10-year plan, hospice and palliative care will be fully funded going forward.

7.31 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for securing this debate and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. As he stated, the debate has taken on an added salience since the hon. Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) brought forward her Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill on assisted dying. I hope we can all agree that regardless of what happens to the passage of the Bill, there is an urgent need to address hospice and palliative care. I want to touch briefly on two points: on children's hospice funding and support; and, more broadly, on inequalities in access to palliative care, which relate to the concerns many of us have about that Bill.

On children's hospices, I am very proud to have Shooting Star children's hospice in my constituency in Hampton, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon referred. As he stated, as well as serving children and young people and their families in my constituency, it actually serves a very wide area of south-west London, west London and all of Surrey. It provides care and support to children with life-limiting conditions, respite care, family support and, importantly, a bereavement service. From talking to the mother of a teenager who died very unexpectedly from an asthma attack in my constituency, I know that her young teenage friends have been very well supported by Shooting Star as they have been grieving their friend who so unexpectedly and tragically lost her life. I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Shooting Star for its incredible work.

Like other hospices, Shooting Star relies on the goodwill and generosity of so many in our community and beyond, skydiving, running, donating clothes and toys to its shops. As my hon. Friend pointed out, it now faces a £200,000 bill as a result of the employers' national insurance rise. While I welcome the Health Secretary's announcement prior to Christmas to renew the children's hospice grant, I reiterate its question which was echoed by my hon. Friend: is this a long-term commitment and not just for the next financial year, and will it be ringfenced? It has told me time and again that it cannot plan for the future if it is living hand to mouth, year to year in terms of recruiting staff and putting services in place.

Hospice funding is so variable. As we have heard, Together for Short Lives reports that NHS funding in 2022-23 for children varied by as much as £483 per child. Hospice UK made a freedom of information request which found, shockingly, that 40% of ICBs have absolutely no idea how much they are spending on children's palliative care. We need to hold our ICBs much more accountable for children's and adult palliative care. Together for Short Lives also highlights a £295 million spending gap in NHS spending on children's palliative care, when compared against National Institute for Health and Care Excellence standards.

That brings me to my second substantive point, on the variability of palliative care with particular regard to how it compares to national standards. Marie Curie estimates that one in four people who could benefit from specialist palliative end of life care do not receive it. People are more likely to get good palliative care, frankly, if they are richer, more educated, white and younger. The inequalities across our society in access to palliative care are growing and demand is growing, too. I had a number of conversations with the hon. Member for Spen Valley. These inequalities are one of many reasons why I really struggled and could not support her Bill on Second Reading. They really, really concern me. Back in 2011—getting on for 14 years ago—NICE recommended that there should be a designated palliative care advice line out of hours implemented in every area of the country, but only one in three areas offers that service. That shows us just how poor we are at putting in place what we have already been told needs to be provided so that people can die a good death. If that happened in any other area of care, particularly in cancer, there would, rightly, be outrage that we were not implementing NICE recommendations.

The 2024 Marie Curie “Better End of Life” report said that large numbers of people were struggling to access services. There was late recognition of their needs and poor communication. It found that the impact on carers of poor end of life care was profound. The physical and emotional toll that it took on carers left one carer saying:

“The overall experience is that no one really cares.”

When we are at our most vulnerable at end of life and our loved ones are also struggling, we deserve so much better. We need far greater investment in palliative care and hospice care. I urge the Minister to take genuine action to address both the geographic disparities and the deep inequalities that exist in accessing palliative care. We have a moral imperative, particularly if the assisted dying Bill makes progress. We cannot be in a position where assisted death is available universally on

the NHS to those identified in the Bill, but access to good palliative care is not. That is what grated with me most and why I could not walk through the Aye Lobby that day. I urge the Minister and the Bill Committee to ensure that duties are written into law so that there is genuine choice at the end of life. Whether the Bill passes or not, we need to see much greater action on good palliative care.

7.38 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for securing this important debate and for his passionate contribution.

It is shocking that, on average, only one third of hospice funding is provided by government, with the rest coming from charitable donations. Rising costs, inconsistent income and a shortage of state funding have left the hospice sector in a precarious position. Indeed, many have had to cut back on the services they can offer and are struggling to meet growing need. A recent meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on hospice and end of life care made for a sobering experience for all the MPs present, because every representative from the hospice sector outlined their fear around the future.

I am blessed to have both Claire House and Zoe's Place children's hospices in my constituency of Liverpool West Derby, but we witnessed first-hand last year the seriousness of the situation for hospices with the threatened closure of Zoe's Place, which rocked us all to the core in my great city. It was unthinkable that something so precious should be lost, but, due to the lack of funds, it was going to happen. However, the community of Liverpool and beyond rose to the challenge by raising an incredible £5 million in 30 days to ensure that this amazing place could remain open. While I have the chance, I want to thank every single individual and organisation who worked relentlessly to make this happen: without them all, the city of Liverpool would have lost Zoe's Place. There are so many that I could name, but let me thank the Steve Morgan Foundation, the 64 Trust and TJ Morris for underpinning this remarkable community effort. They should not have had to do this.

I am pleased, then, that in December the Government recognised the crisis faced by hospices and committed £126 million to the sector, with £100 million of one-off funding and a one-year extension of the children's hospice grant, but this is still only a sticking plaster. Hospices need consistent, reliable funding that accurately reflects the cost of care and their value in society to be able to meet the growing demand for palliative and end of life care, to ensure that people have the best possible experience at the end of their lives, and to prevent future funding crises. Hospice sector leaders have estimated that the need for palliative care in the UK will increase by 25% over the next 25 years, and it is clear that long-term reform of the hospice funding model is necessary to ensure that this demand can be met. That is why I back the calls from Hospice UK for the Government to commit themselves to a long-term reform of hospice funding in their 10-year plan for the NHS.

I have a couple of questions for the Minister, who has been superb in supporting me over Zoe's Place. Will the Government ensure that the confirmed £26 million NHS England funding for children's hospices for 2025-26 is ringfenced, distributed centrally, and increased in line

[Ian Byrne]

with inflation in subsequent years, and does the Minister recognise the strong preference among children's hospices for that £26 million to be distributed as a centrally managed and ringfenced grant rather than being distributed via integrated care boards?

Without ongoing Government support and a fresh funding model, what nearly happened to Zoe's Place in Liverpool will happen elsewhere. Hospices will undoubtedly close down. The problems are systemic, and it will take Government action to fix that. The city of Liverpool rose to the challenge to save Zoe's Place; now this place has to rise to the challenge as well, and give all hospices the funding that they need to survive. This cannot wait, because all who rely on these incredible services do not have time on their side.

7.42 pm

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): Let me first pay tribute to the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for securing this important debate, and for his heartfelt contribution. I imagine that there is no one in this House, or even across these islands, whose life has not been touched by hospice care, and I want to pay a personal tribute to my niece, Dr Róisín Etchells, who works in this field.

Recently the House had what was by all accounts a respectful, informed and emotional debate on the concept of assisted dying, thanks to the efforts of the hon. Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater). Perversely, this Government have introduced additional employer national insurance contribution charges on the independent hospice sector, which can only be described as an attack, an assault on the very concept of assisted dying as we currently deliver it—for that is what hospice care is and does, and what others who deliver palliative care in the independent sector within the community do.

In Scotland one of the leading providers of such care, both in residential settings and in the community—within people's homes—is Marie Curie. It operates at least two residential services and community care in almost every local authority area in Scotland. Here I declare an interest as a proud supporter of Marie Curie, and as someone who has helped to raise significant funds for it. It does wonderful work, providing skilled care and brightening the lives of patients as they face the prospect of their last weeks, days and hours. Ask any family who have benefited from this support; I defy anyone to find a critic.

Of course I understand that the Government must balance their books and that public sector pay rises must be funded, but the failure to offer mitigations in key areas of these self-same public sector services is misguided, ill-informed, clumsy and counterproductive. "Where will we find the money for these services?", Ministers will cry, but they know that there are alternatives. In their populist haste to win the trust of the electorate, they rashly promised not to increase income tax. They should look at Scotland, where those with the broadest shoulders pay a little more, where in every tax bracket more people are coming to pay their taxes in Scotland every year, where 60% of taxpayers pay less than their counterparts in the rest of this disunited kingdom, and where the Government responsible for this alleged mismanagement have enjoyed public support for close to 20 years and continue to do so.

We in the Scottish National party estimate that if the UK Government had matched the Scottish tax bands, they could have raised £16 billion. In the recently announced Scottish Budget, it was encouraging to see that the Scottish Government committed themselves to increasing hospice funding by £4 million, and to providing additional funding for hospice staff to match NHS pay awards. To me, that is the difference between the Scottish and UK Governments. While the UK Government hike national insurance on employers and vote against amendments to exempt hospices from that hike, the Scottish Government increase hospice funding, and put more money in the pockets of hospice healthcare workers.

Like other Scottish MPs, probably, I received a heartfelt plea from Children's Hospices Across Scotland. If the Minister had read it, he would know how desperate the situation is. I implore the Government to think again, to engage with the Scottish Government to ascertain the cost of mitigations for hospice and palliative care service providers and others, and to provide the same mitigating support that has been given to the NHS and other public services in Scotland.

7.46 pm

Mrs Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): Let me begin by paying tribute, as others have done, to some local hospices. Both St Luke's and East Cheshire do a spectacular job, and are very well loved local institutions. I want to say a particular thank you to the staff, of course, but also to the volunteers, and the donors who are literally keeping the lights on. I greatly welcome the £100 million of capital that the Government are providing for hospices, and I ask the Minister to meet me, along with my hon. Friends the Members for Crewe and Nantwich (Connor Naismith), for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper), and for Macclesfield (Tim Roca), to discuss a potential local project.

On revenue funding, it would be remiss of me not to mention that St Luke's and East Cheshire hospices receive 15% and 16% respectively of their funding from the NHS. May I ask the Minister to review that, and commit himself to a funding floor that is transparent, fair and consistent across the country? The quality of the experience that my constituents and their families have at the end of life should not depend on the generosity of individuals.

7.47 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for speaking so eloquently in this important debate, and for securing it. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee.

Hospices are fantastic places, and all of us in this country are lucky to have them. People go to hospices not to die, but to live the last few days or weeks of their life. While I am pleased that the assisted dying Bill has led to a renewed interest in hospice and palliative care, I am sad that so much of the focus has been on death and the dying process, rather than on the broader support and care offered by hospices and palliative care providers—sometimes over many years—to people who have illnesses that may be life-limiting, and who require certain types of medical intervention to manage their symptoms. That is a very important part of the work that hospices

and palliative care teams do, but as I say, much of the focus is often on the death process, rather than the treatment given to those with chronic conditions.

Speaking as a former consultant psychiatrist, it would be remiss of me not to mention the psychological support and mental health interventions by palliative care teams and hospices. They are experts in pain relief. Palliative care teams brought a lot of relief to me when, as a junior doctor, I tried to manage very difficult situations in patient care. They are experts in analgesic components. It is important to recognise the palliative care teams working in not only hospices but hospital settings and the community to alleviate people's symptoms.

I pay tribute to the fantastic local hospices and care teams in the Runnymede and Weybridge constituency, at Woking & Sam Beare hospice, which I have visited and is a fantastic place, and at Princess Alice hospice, based in Esher. We also benefit from Shooting Stars, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson). I hope to visit that one day. I thank all the teams who work in those hospices for delivering care and support, but also for keeping the hospices running, and for their vital fundraising.

Many people support hospices in lots of different ways, including through direct donations and organising fundraising events, and I am pleased to have been to fundraising events for Woking & Sam Beare hospice. In fact, a week or two ago, I went to the Chertsey panto, which has been running for 12 years. It supports the Woking & Sam Beare hospice. The performances, if one can call them that, have raised £60,000. The panto has to be seen to be believed; one will never forget the Chertsey panto after one has gone to it. The team who organise and run it are absolutely fantastic. It is a fantastic institution and raises a lot of good money for the hospice.

We also have charity shops. There is a great one in Weybridge that has been raising money for quite some time. I pay tribute to everybody for what they do, no matter how big or small, to support our hospices and our palliative care sector.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Will the hon. Member join me in promoting a fundraiser being held by St Wilfrid's hospice in Eastbourne, called "I'm a CEO...Get Me Out of Here!"? It is trying to get lots of local chief executive officers and MPs to join the hospice staff in the Sussex jungle, to raise cash for the great work that the hospice does.

Dr Spencer: The hon. Member will have to explain further what is required from those who commit to fundraising in the Sussex jungle. He is right to pay tribute to those doing great work in support of our hospice sector. Its funding model is part public and part private, which gives hospices a great benefit. As they sit outside the NHS, they have greater flexibility in how they approach care provision. Woking & Sam Beare hospice is 31% funded by public sector money. It has 2,000 staff and, as I said, delivers fantastic care and support.

Much of this debate has been about the future of funding for our hospice sector. Although I am grateful to the Government for the money and support that they have put forward for hospices, sadly they have given with one hand and taken away with the other. The rise

in employers' national insurance contributions is very damaging, and hospices also need to manage increases to staffing budgets as a result of the Agenda for Change. Marie Curie has said that the national insurance component will cost it roughly £2.9 million per year.

Could the Minister say what impact assessment has been done on the national insurance contribution rises for hospices, and on the Agenda for Change? How many hospices in the UK are running a deficit, and how does he expect that to change over the next year and going forward, as a consequence of the decisions made in the Budget? If there is an opportunity to reverse those decisions, does he supporting doing so?

7.54 pm

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for securing today's debate.

I am incredibly proud of many things in Beckenham and Penge, but particularly St Christopher's hospice. It was founded in 1967 by Dame Cicely Saunders, the founder of the global hospice movement. The movement came about because Dame Cicely, a nurse who was researching pain control, believed that more could be done to help people at the end of their life. That included dealing with physical symptoms and tackling the stigma around painkillers, but also the idea that people should be able to achieve emotional closure through individualised care and support.

The assisted dying debate has been mentioned today by Members from across the House. I had over 2,000 constituents contact me about that debate, and there was roughly a 50:50 split between those who supported and opposed the Bill, but every single one of them was united by compassion, and they relayed their experiences of seeing people at the end of their life.

I pay tribute this evening to a woman I was incredibly fortunate to work for in this place, Dame Tessa Jowell. Tessa was a very good friend, a mentor and an amazing boss. Six years ago next week, she made her final speech in Parliament. Tessa was diagnosed with a terminal brain tumour. I was with her from her diagnosis through to writing the press release on the night she died. She finished her speech in the other place by saying:

"In the end, what gives a life meaning is not only how it is lived, but how it draws to a close."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 25 January 2018; Vol. 788, c. 1170.]

I sincerely believe that.

St Christopher's hospice gives meaning to life as it draws to a close. It does so by taking a holistic approach; it cares for a patient's physical, spiritual and psychological wellbeing. I have seen at first hand the intimate bonds and relationships established between staff, volunteers, patients and families. The hospice is one of the largest providers of palliative care education in the world. For all those reasons, we in Beckenham and Penge all support St Christopher's hospice, which is a huge part of our community. I was fundraising for the hospice long before I became an MP, and I continue to do so.

People help in lots of different ways, and I want to give a special mention to Penge Fest, which is south-east London's answer to Oktoberfest. Local businesses such as Brewery, the Three Hounds and Designer Drapes, organisations including Friends of Cator Park and Penge business improvement district, and many more

[Liam Conlon]

came together with local residents for a day of fun and fundraising that included an oompah band. The event brought Penge high street to a standstill last summer. We will continue to fundraise for St Christopher's hospice, but we should not have to do so to pay for the basics. Supporting our hospices benefits everyone, from the NHS to patients, and that is why I welcome the Government's announcement, just before Christmas, of an extra £100 million in hospice funding, as well as the extension of the children's hospice grants. That will ease the strain on hospices and benefit patients, as well as the wider health and care systems.

However, hospices still face pressures, including increased demand for services, the rising cost of provision and discrepancies in funding across the country, which many Members have mentioned this evening. That is why, as the Minister recognises, hospices must be a key part of the Government's plan to shift care into the community, including through the provision of at-home care services. That can ease the acute pressures on the NHS. I invite the Minister to visit St Christopher's to see its fantastic work for himself, and to discuss the role of hospices in the Government's commitment to ensuring that every person has access to high-quality end of life care.

I thank the hon. Member for Wimbledon again for securing today's debate, and the Government for the vital work that they are undertaking on this important issue.

7.59 pm

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for securing this debate on this important subject. As many people said during the assisted dying discussions, it is clear that the one thing that everybody has in common is a desire to see better palliative care being made more available across the country. Nearly a third of palliative care in Scotland is delivered by charities, and it is the same across the UK. In Scotland, hospice charities provide end of life care to over 20,000 people a year, ensuring compassion and care at the end of life. This figure is expected to rise by 40% in the next 15 years.

My constituency does not have a hospice within its boundaries, but we have many people who work and volunteer in the hospice sector. There is concern that the lack of understanding of the core role and wide scope of palliative care, which has for too long been funded outside the NHS despite being a fundamental aspect of care, has led to a shortfall in services, including palliative care for children. For too long, hospices have struggled with insufficient funding from consecutive Scottish and UK Governments, with less than half the funding for hospice care coming from Government sources. While the £100 million extra is absolutely welcome, there is still a huge shortfall.

The national insurance increase is projected to cost Scottish hospices an extra £2.5 million a year, and it comes at a time when Marie Curie has highlighted that one in four people across the UK are unable to access the necessary support. This increased financial burden will undoubtedly lead to fewer beds, reduced services and a diminished quality of care for some of our most vulnerable citizens at the end of life. Inevitably, this will

compound the effects of the staff shortages already being faced by the care industry, further straining hospice care providers.

Where palliative care is available, there are still shortages, especially in psychological support and spiritual care, plus the possibility of serious recruitment problems with any assisted dying provision and in the social care structures that support people in their own homes. Fourteen hospice care providers have already issued an open letter calling for cross-party consensus on sustainable hospice funding. Their plea highlights the urgent need for additional support to ensure that these vital institutions are not forced to ration care or to close their doors.

I therefore urge the Government again to consider exempting hospices from the recent national insurance hike. This would be a practical step to alleviate the financial strain on hospices and hospice charities. By doing so, we would not remove crucial funding from palliative care which, as we have heard, is often raised by charitable donations. We must support palliative care services and ensure that all who need hospice care can access it, allowing them dignity and compassion in their end of life care.

8.3 pm

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this important debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for securing it. I am grateful that the Government have recognised the immense importance of our hospices' vital work with the recent announcement of a £100 million funding package.

My constituency is served by the extraordinary work of St Catherine's hospice. For 40 years, St Catherine's has supported and lovingly cared for individuals with a terminal illness and their families, not only on site in Scarborough but in people's homes in an area of North Yorkshire covering more than 1,600 square miles. St Catherine's provides an incredible service and, like most hospices around the country, is a charitable, independent organisation largely funded through donations, fundraising and the income from its high street charity shops. I would like to place on record my sincere thanks to the wonderful staff, the army of selfless volunteers who give freely of their time, and the generosity of the local people who all ensure that hospice care is available to everyone in the constituency.

St Catherine's welcomed our recent funding announcement, but it is clear that one-off capital injections alone will not address the underlying structural funding deficit. At the heart of the issue is the lack of clarity, equity and accountability in how integrated care boards allocate funding. Currently, there is no standard formula for funding distribution, which is creating disparity across hospices. St Catherine's receives approximately 30% of its funding from the NHS, which is insufficient to meet the growing needs of the community. Some hospices receive much more, and others slightly less. Greater transparency and a consistent framework are needed to ensure equitable funding across all providers, whether NHS or charity based.

This inequity places immense pressure on charitable fundraising and limits what hospices can achieve. St Catherine's alone must raise over £6 million annually. Surely the hospice sector needs funding models that align with service outcomes. A model similar to the mental

health investment standard, mandating a minimum level of investment in palliative and end of life care, could perhaps provide the consistency and accountability that are so urgently needed. Long-term strategy is equally critical. It is my hope that a 10-year NHS plan will include detailed guidance for ICBs on commissioning hospice care, supported by a national funding strategy that reduces reliance on voluntary contributions for essential services.

Dame Cicely Saunders, the founder of the modern hospice movement, said:

“You matter because you are you. You matter to the last moment of your life”.

Our hospices strive to make every moment matter for patients and their loved ones. We must recognise hospices as integral partners within the healthcare system. By doing so, we will ensure that hospices are adequately supported to deliver extraordinary care both now and in the future.

8.7 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): Hospices provide vital care for adults and children with life-limiting conditions, offering end of life care, pain management and bereavement support to families, but despite being this essential part of healthcare, the hospice sector has challenges due to inadequate Government funding and the taxes that they are putting on it, and to workforce shortages. That is all compounded by rising costs and economic uncertainty.

Before I became a Member of Parliament, I have to confess that I had, perhaps fortunately, very little contact with the hospice sector, despite having worked in health and social care for the majority of my career and being a local government councillor for 17 years. During the election campaign, I was invited to the Shooting Star children's hospice, which has been mentioned by numerous Members across the House. I visited Christopher's, which is its in-house care facility in Guildford. I think it is actually in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Jeremy Hunt)—I am sure that the hon. Member for Guildford (Zoe Franklin) will correct me if I am wrong. There I saw the true meaning of selfless day-to-day acts of kindness and care, with people looking after some of the most vulnerable children and their families. They are the absolute exemplar of people providing dying well.

I also have the Phyllis Tuckwell hospice in my constituency, which is currently going through a multimillion-pound rebuild funded by donations from people who have either used or care for our hospice in Farnham. When it is open—hopefully by the end of the year—it will provide 18 new palliative care beds alongside rehabilitation and services for the families as well, along with therapy sessions. Both are shining examples of what dying well should look like.

As other hon. Members have mentioned, the one good thing to come out of the assisted dying debate has been a much greater focus in this House, and indeed across the country, on what it means to die well. I echo some of the comments we have heard: let us get palliative care and hospice care right first, before we start thinking about whether or not we should be allowing people to kill themselves.

Despite the Government's announcement just after Christmas, which I would be churlish not to welcome, the reality is that adult hospices and children's hospices are almost totally reliant on charitable donations. The rest comes through the integrated care boards and, as the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) just mentioned, it is a complete postcode lottery.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for securing the debate, and he mentioned the significant variation in per person funding depending on where they are in the country and at which hospice they are being treated. The children's hospice sector is the starkest example, with some places funding just under £30 a head, whereas others fund over £500 a head. This inequity in care clearly leaves some families worse off.

The Government really have not made it easy for the hospice sector. It is still not clear to me that the Health Secretary and the Department of Health had any clue that the national insurance contribution changes were coming down the line. If they were aware, had they allocated this funding beforehand? Was this in their plan, or have they been scrabbling to try to make up the difference since they heard this announcement? Despite asking questions, I have not heard an answer.

We also have not heard whether the Government will cover the costs of the national insurance contribution rise. My personal view is that they must, because the hospice sector, alongside so much of the care sector, is vital not just to the people who use it, but to the wider health economy. Underfunding and taking money from hospice care will have a significant cost impact on other parts of the health service.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): The hon. Member seems to welcome the additional £100 million for the hospice sector and, indeed, the additional investment in the NHS that have come out of the Budget, but he seems not to welcome the way in which that revenue is being raised. How would his party raise the revenue needed for the NHS and the hospice sector?

Gregory Stafford: Well, the simple fact is that what the hon. Members and his Front-Bench team are doing is ensuring that the NHS is worse off, because raising the money will have a greater impact on the rest of the service. *[Interruption.]* The Minister for Care is shouting at me from the Front Bench, and I am sure that, in his response to the debate, he can outline whether he and his team knew about the national insurance contribution rises and whether they planned for them.

The other part of this is the workforce, who have been touched on briefly. There is a real shortage of qualified healthcare professionals. Vacancy rates for hospice nurses have risen to nearly 19%, and the corollary is that staff morale is low. Again, the Government need to make sure that the long-term workforce plan that they and the NHS are rolling out includes how we will ensure that hospice staff are part of the long-term funding. Hospice UK has warned, seriously, that without urgent action, some, indeed many, hospices may be forced to close their doors in the next 12 months.

I have some requests of the Government. First, as the hon. Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) said, we need them to commit to a long-term sustainable funding model for hospices. That is not to say that hospices should be brought into

[Gregory Stafford]

the central NHS—I personally believe that the innovation of the hospice sector is down to its independence from the NHS—but they need multi-year funding to understand where they stand.

Secondly, as has been mentioned, we need to scrap the postcode lottery that comes from the integrated care boards. Some kind of ringfenced funding, particularly for children's hospice grants, would prevent a lot of the delays and inequities in the service. As I said, we need to make sure that hospice staff are integrated into the NHS long-term workforce plan and are paid in parity with similar NHS roles.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman join me in paying tribute to the Phyllis Tuckwell hospice, which does great work in his constituency and mine? I have been speaking to the hospice over the last few days, and it requires £25,000 a day to maintain its services. The hospice has told me that it desperately needs multi-year funding settlements to offer a guarantee of future financial security, as well as a clearly articulated workforce plan to ensure continuity of high-quality staff.

Gregory Stafford: I think I mentioned Phyllis Tuckwell at the beginning of my speech, so I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. It does fantastic work in Farnham and across Surrey and Hampshire. I am sure like all hospices around the country, it relies on donations but requires secure funding from the Government.

I welcome the £100 million of capital investment. We need to remember that hospices and palliative care are not a “nice to have.” They are absolutely essential charitable services, and they must be fully integrated into the funding and planning frameworks of the Department of Health and the NHS. They provide compassionate, life-changing care to thousands of adults and children every year. However, this vital work is being undermined by short-sighted Government policies.

If the Government are serious about improving end of life care and reducing hospital pressures, they must deliver fair funding, address workforce challenges and ensure that no family are left without the care they need, regardless of where they live. This is not just about numbers—the Minister might listen to this. It is about dignity, it is about compassion and it is about humanity at the most vulnerable time in people's lives.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Members will see that we have some pressure on time this evening, and I want to get everyone in. Before I call the next speaker, I suggest an informal four-minute time limit.

8.17 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) on securing this important and timely debate. The provision of hospices and palliative care is an essential part of our nation's health service, playing a unique and vital role in our communities and often providing services that the NHS simply cannot cater for.

We are very fortunate in north London to be served by two amazing hospices. North London hospice and Noah's Ark children's hospice provide extraordinary end of life care, comfort and dignity for individuals and their families in Enfield, Barnet and Haringey. I have had the pleasure of visiting both, and I have seen at first hand the exceptional services they provide.

North London hospice supports over 4,000 people each year. Its services range from in-patient care to community-based support that allows people to die at home, if that is their wish. It also provides counselling, support and wellbeing therapies. Its community engagement is excellent, and I had the pleasure of attending its compassionate neighbours event in December. Through the programme, community volunteers befriend and support individuals at the end of their life, providing friendship and help with chores on a regular basis. Similarly, Noah's Ark children's hospice, which I visited on Friday, provides a lifeline for children with life-limiting or life-threatening conditions. Its hospice at home service allows children to receive care in familiar surroundings, which is often invaluable for families. I doubt that the services and facilities it provides can be bettered.

These organisations are models of good practice, but they are indicative of the challenges faced by hospices in England. Both face financial challenges to keep going, and the extraordinary work done by their fundraising teams should be highly commended. North London hospice has £16 million of running costs every year and could not provide its current services without donations and fundraising. It was an honour to raise funds for that hospice when I ran the London marathon in April last year, as did many other people to raise money. My time was five hours, 51 minutes. Noah's Ark children's hospice has to find a staggering £6.5 million a year to keep going and has even talked me into doing some fundraising, although I politely declined the skydiving option, as fun runs are more my choice of activity for fundraising.

The additional £100 million of capital investment for hospices announced by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is very welcome, as is the £26 million for children and young people's hospices. However, demand for palliative care is expected to rise by 25% over the next 25 years so the funding model for hospices needs to be resolved for the long term. Although the NHS provides some financial support, that typically accounts for only a fraction of their costs.

Moreover, the process of accessing public funding through integrated care boards is fraught with challenges. Hospices must navigate a labyrinth of bureaucracy to secure funding that has often already been allocated to them. Delays, inconsistencies and a lack of transparency in decision making can leave hospices in financial limbo. We have all seen the extraordinary fundraising efforts undertaken by hospices, but while those activities are inspiring, they also highlight a stark reality: hospices are being asked to do too much with too little.

The current funding model creates a sense of perpetual precarity, where even a slight downturn in donations could have devastating consequences for patients and families. The question we must ask ourselves is this: do we, as a society, truly value the care that hospices provide? If the answer is yes, we must reflect that value in our policies and funding structures. That means increasing NHS funding for hospices so they are not forced to depend so

heavily on charity; streamlining the process of accessing funds through ICBs, with clear timelines and accountability; and recognising the unique challenges faced by children's hospices by providing them with the additional support that they need.

In conclusion, hospices such as the North London hospice and Noah's Ark children's hospice exemplify the best of what we can achieve as a society. They are places of compassion, expertise and hope, but they cannot continue to operate under the current financial and bureaucratic pressures. We owe it to them—and to the people they serve—to provide the support that they need to thrive. Let us ensure that hospices have the resources they need to continue their vital work—not just today, but for generations to come.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I will now be imposing a hard stop at four minutes, and that may reduce even further. I call SORCHA EASTWOOD.

8.22 pm

SORCHA EASTWOOD (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): I thank the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for bringing this matter to the House. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) for how she has conducted the debate on assisted dying, which we have all talked about so much and which most hon. Members have mentioned today. Regardless of people's opinion on the matter, during the debate on the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill everyone agreed that we need to discuss palliative care. We need to ensure such care is delivered equitably, not just locally; as a lot of hon. Members have said, delivery is not only about hospices but about palliation.

I do not have a hospice in my constituency of Lagan Valley, but some of my constituents have been moved to the Southern Area hospice and the Marie Curie hospice. As well as that, we have the wonderful Daisy Lodge—a facility used as a hospice but also as somewhere for people to go to get respite. This is about supporting people to live well. I think it was the hon. Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi) who said during the debate on the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill that before we die, we have to live well. That should really be at the forefront of what we are talking about today whenever we are capturing the spirit of asking how we can help people to live the lives they should be living, in a way that is not impacted by inequality through a loss of services.

One of the issues mentioned during that debate was cancer; I know a lot about that as my husband has cancer. I want to make it clear that most people want to be able to die at home. For some, that is very achievable and doable. However, haematological neoplasms often prohibit many people who suffer from blood cancer from being able to die at home. We heard from the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) about issues to do with the workforce. With cancer, there is sometimes a real onus on haematologists because so much of the treatment is do with “the bloods”: how they are performing in terms of chemotherapy, radiotherapy and otherwise. In 2019, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee raised the issue of workforce with the British Society for Haematology and the Royal College of Pathologists.

I was concerned about that at the time, but I am not sure we are much further on with that now so I remain concerned to this day.

I am also concerned about the impact of the national insurance contribution increase. I was the only Northern Irish MP to propose an amendment to the National Insurance Contributions (Secondary Class 1 Contributions) Bill to try to exclude Northern Ireland from the increase; unfortunately, that was unsuccessful. The increase creates an unfair further divide between people who provide community and voluntary services, and those who provide statutory state services.

It is incumbent on all of us to keep talking about dying well. We have a good Irish tradition of wakes; we really get into the spirit of helping people through loss, bereavement and grief. We can continue to do that only if we have strong, well-funded hospices.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I was in the hon. Lady's constituency yesterday, so I know well the points she makes and I thank her for letting me visit. She talks about dying well. Will she join me in paying tribute to the Douglas Macmillan hospice, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner), which does so much to provide care and compassion to many people in Newcastle-under-Lyme and across north Staffordshire, as it seeks to ensure that people do indeed die well?

SORCHA EASTWOOD: I thank the hon. Member for his contribution and of course I will join him in that.

In closing, I want us to keep talking about living and dying well because we cannot shy away from that debate. We owe it to our constituents, not just mine in Lagan Valley but those across the UK, to ensure that we get this right.

8.26 pm

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): In this Parliament, we have spoken at length about the importance of valuing dignity at the end of life. That principle must be applied to hospice and palliative care, which has faced uncertain funding and been too hard to access for too long. Like most of us, I have reason to be grateful for the work of palliative care professionals. Even though more than 15 years have passed, I still remember with a great sense of gratitude and relief the compassionate care that my grandmother, Janet Russell, received at the end of her life at the St Mary's hospice, which is now the Birmingham hospice, in Selly Oak.

In advance of the debate, I have been in contact with five palliative care professionals in my constituency, who stressed the consequences of the long-term pressures we have heard so much about, including the shortages of palliative care workers and the strain that puts on those who remain. One said:

“I'm deeply passionate about what I do and I have seen many lives improved by palliative care but I'm exhausted and often think about giving up.”

The strains on the system have led, to quote again from one of my constituents, to

“a higher threshold for admitting patients and a lower threshold for discharging patients...we are being asked to stretch further, with less, for longer...you can't give quality medical care when your hands are empty”.

[Laurence Turner]

My constituents stressed that there can be public misunderstandings about the nature of palliative care, which reduces suffering, and on average extends life. Those misconceptions have been exacerbated by some of the media coverage of the assisted dying debate, which can make people less likely to seek such care.

A number of hon. Members spoke about the importance of children's hospice funding. The children's hospice grant was effectively ended last year, although it is important to note that transitional arrangements were put in place. The new funding announced before Christmas has been welcomed by the sector; it is important to stress how welcome that funding is. I heard that recently at the Acorns children's hospice, which in the last year has cared for 14 children from Northfield. I heard about the plans that Acorns has to put that funding to good use when I visited recently, alongside my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns). It is an exceptional facility, but the sector still needs long-term funding certainty, set out on a multi-year basis, if it is to deliver efficiencies and certainty for staff.

I welcome the constructive approach that the Minister has taken on this issue since July. I ask him to give us an update today, or soon, on whether the Government will be in a position either to restore the children's hospice grant on a long-term basis or provide similar certainty through another means. Whatever happens in this Parliament in respect of assisted dying, will the Government work with palliative care professionals to set out, as part of the NHS 10-year plan, a clear timeline for improving palliative care provision, which in too many areas is strained? I thank the Backbench Business Committee for making time for this important discussion, and the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for the constructive tone in which he led the debate.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We have 60 minutes left, and 19 Members still wish to speak, so I will have to drop the time limit to three minutes.

8.30 pm

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I shall be as fast as I can, Madam Deputy Speaker. There is no doubt that there is massive support for the hospice movement in this place. While the new funding is welcome, Clare Gallie, the chief executive of the Lewis-Manning hospice in Poole said:

"There is simply no point in having fully fitted and beautiful buildings if we cannot afford the staff to run them!"

When someone has a terminal diagnosis, their world turns upside down. It may have come out of the blue, or it may be after years of intensive treatment, when they are already at breaking point and sick. Families have to come to terms with losing the person they love, and learn to cope with managing distressing symptoms, processing their own emotions, and managing money worries and potentially their own health issues. People will be coming in and out of the house at a time when they just want to be left alone. They will also be terrified of being left alone and something awful happening.

They are more likely to call their GP on a Friday afternoon, worried that no one will be around at the weekend; more likely to witness a distressing symptom and ring for an ambulance, creating an emergency dash to the hospital and a lengthy stay on a trolley; and more likely to be subjected to blood tests and interventions that will not alter the path of their disease.

I went on that journey when my mum, Lin Foster, died of ovarian cancer aged just 59, but we were lucky: we had the support of district nurses and palliative care teams through Forest Holme. For the last eight weeks of her life, when she did not leave her bed, those people came in and out of her house with no need to knock. They knew where the kettle was, and they knew when we needed our own time. They managed her every need, including supporting her as she planned her own funeral. She did not want to go to hospital. She wanted to end her days in the thatched cottage that had been her lifelong dream. That is what most people say they want, but only 37% of cancer patients are at home at the time of their death.

Junior doctors tell us that palliative patients are spending months in general medical wards, frequently dying there. I was told:

"It is not right, it is not humane because general wards lack the skills".

It also does not save the NHS money. I have written to the Minister about the Lewis-Manning anticipatory care model, which I also raised with the all-party parliamentary group on hospice and end of life care. That programme seeks involvement at the point of diagnosis. Lewis-Manning ran a pilot from April 2024 to this month that saved NHS Dorset £765,000 across Poole and Purbeck.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and to the hon. Member for Spenn Valley (Kim Leadbeater) for her Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill, which has done so much to bring this debate into the national consciousness. Does my hon. Friend agree with the Liberal Democrat policy that the Government should exempt hospices from the NIC rise?

Vikki Slade: I completely agree, but what is really ridiculous is that, according to the Department of Health and Social Care, over 10 million hospital days followed an emergency admission in the last year of life, and 10% of people who died of cancer had three or more emergency admissions in the last three months of their life. The anticipatory care model can prevent some of those admissions and reduce the trauma. Further to my letter, sent in November, I urge the Minister to meet me and Clare Gallie to talk about a transformative approach.

I was deeply concerned when Marie Curie emailed me to say that Dorset integrated care board will stop commissioning specialist end of life care from March. The rationale is that personal care commissioning will go via council frameworks, but they do not require expertise in the provision of end of life care. I urge the Minister to insist that the specialists are listened to in the framework and to ensure that Lewis-Manning and Marie Curie are heard. Those organisations are looking to make redundancies and close services at a time when hospital beds are at a premium—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order.

8.35 pm

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): Hartlepool is incredibly lucky to be served by an amazing institution—one that has touched the lives of so many in our town. Alice House hospice and the brilliant people who work there, like hospices across the country, provide essential support to those in their final stages of life, ensuring that they receive the dignity and care they deserve.

The stark reality, though, is that Alice House alone requires £3.6 million each year to operate, with only 25% of that money coming from the Government. That means it has to raise £7,000 a day just to keep the doors open and to provide services. Any additional work beyond ordinary maintenance comes at an extra cost. As we have heard, that is a situation mirrored across the country. Dignity at end of life should not rely on charity. Rising costs and inconsistent financial support have left many hospitals struggling, forcing them to cut back their services. Indeed, Hospice UK reports that as many as 20% of hospices were cutting some level of provision, fuelling a bed crisis. Sadly, that was the case for Alice House when it closed its long-term care unit in 2023.

I welcome the Labour Government's recognition of this financial crisis and its backing through the £126 million announced in December. While that support is welcome, we cannot be complacent. We need to ensure that the 10-year NHS plan includes long-term commitments to reforming the hospice funding model. That is essential not just to prevent another funding crisis, but to ensure that hospices can provide the essential care on which our communities rely. The need for palliative care is projected to increase by 25% over the next 25 years. We must therefore act now to ensure that our hospices can meet demand. They are not just places of care, but vital support systems that relieve pressure on our NHS, providing specialised care and training to health professionals across the board. When hospices are forced to cut services, the need for care does not disappear. It shifts directly on to our already overburdened NHS.

Life has a tendency to shape and focus one's attention on the issues in this place. My father has Alzheimer's. Although he is currently very well, I know that our family—me, him and my wonderful mother—are going to face a difficult future. We have a responsibility now to fix that future for everybody who will need that care in the future, and I hope that is what the Government will do.

8.38 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate and to follow the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash). I thank him for his personal story. Personal stories tell the story of the debate we have in front of us. During the last debate on assisted dying, the dire straits of our palliative care system were rightly put under the spotlight, so I am pleased to see this debate to address the system and the lack of funding.

I will refer to two charities in Northern Ireland that I have had contact with. One of them is Northern Ireland Hospice. It has highlighted that the Government fund approximately 30% of service costs, so the majority of its income relies on the good will and generosity of voluntary donations and other fundraising activities. That means 70% of the funding to provide its specialist palliative care for over 4,000 infants, children and adults

with life-limiting conditions in Northern Ireland comes from the funding raised by volunteers. We owe a lot to Northern Ireland Hospice and its volunteers.

The people of Northern Ireland are incredibly generous when it comes to charitable giving, but when we take into account the cost of living crisis and the fact that it naturally reduces what people can give—it is a fact of life—we can see the concerns of the hospice sector. Indeed, when Northern Ireland Hospice believed that its funding would be cut by health trusts last year, it announced that it would have to cut the number of beds available in children's hospices from seven beds all week round to six beds Monday to Friday and only three at the weekend, which represents a massive change in what it is able to do. That is not the news that we want to hear. It does not mean that fewer children need hospice facilities, but that costs have risen, the ability of fundraisers has decreased, and the Government have not enabled health trusts to make up the difference. Although I have underlined the situation in children's hospices, the issue is replicated in adult care in every corner of the UK. The hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann) is here. He is a former Health Minister of Northern Ireland, and whenever Northern Ireland Hospice needed help, he was able to allocate funding to get it over that hard patch. I thank him on the record for all that he did to make that happen.

Funding for palliative care is simply not sufficient. I referred to burnout when the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) very kindly let me intervene earlier. Medical staff whose loyalty and passion for the job keeps them in post, doing overtime or working unpaid to provide cover, are exhausted and unable to carry on. Marie Curie says that one in four people will die without the right care and support. Far too many people are dying in avoidable pain, in poverty, and alone. By 2048, the need for end of life care will have risen by up to 25%, so the challenge for tomorrow is even greater than the challenge for today—over 730,000 people will need care every year. We know that that crisis is looming, and now is the time to make changes for our loved ones and our constituents. Like other Members, that is what I am asking the Minister to do.

8.41 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for securing the debate.

I will challenge any politician, regardless of their rosette, when they say that the NHS is broken. It is not broken; it is just underfunded. It is starved of the resources that it needs to function at its very best. We on the Labour Benches are enormously proud of the NHS and its founding principles: the universal right to comprehensive healthcare that is free at the point of use. Money should never be the passport to the best treatment. People should get the best that modern science can offer.

The NHS is our greatest creation, and it is socialism in action. As the NHS endures another hard winter, so must Labour's founding principles. The private sector should not always be the solution. The private sector receiving an extra £2.5 billion a year in Government funding to cut waiting lists is not one of the principles—of either the NHS or the Labour party. There was an earlier back and forth between hon. Members on how to find money. That does not necessarily have to mean cuts; I suggest an annual wealth tax.

[Brian Leishman]

In Scotland, our hospices remain under enormous strain. Annually, approximately 21,000 adults and children receive expert palliative care, end of life care and bereavement support. The heads of all 14 hospice charities in Scotland have said that their sector is in the grip of an insurmountable funding gap, and staff have spoken openly of the dire possibility of budget shortfalls reaching the point where there will be no other option but to introduce service reductions. Of course, staff will do everything in their power to avoid that, but it is the stark reality of palliative and end of life care in Scotland. The hospice sector needs the Scottish Government to provide further financial support to address the shortfall in statutory funding, which is not keeping up with increased costs. That, coupled with the Scottish Government's delivery on their promise of a new national funding framework for hospice care, is desperately needed, so that hospices can prepare for the long term.

Seamus Logan: The Secretary of State repeatedly tells us that all roads lead to Westminster when it comes to funding. Does the hon. Member agree that the Scottish Government can do only what is possible with the resources made available by Westminster?

Brian Leishman: The Scottish Government need to do much better with the resources they have been given.

On the topic of funding, hospices also rely on financial donations, and people the length and breadth of the UK raise so much for hospices. Naturally, many loyal supporters of the hospice sector have not been immune to the bankrupt political ideology of austerity, and the ensuing cost of living crisis has seen ordinary people become poorer, with out-of-control food bills, escalating food costs and sky-high mortgages and rents. Overall, the general erosion of living standards means that donations are an expense that many people can simply no longer afford.

The rebuilding of wider society cannot happen without the rebuilding of and investment in the vital public services that people rely on. That includes a properly funded and resourced health and social care system that has the same principles and ethos as when Labour created it.

8.45 pm

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): I will not focus on assisted dying/assisted suicide this evening, because as the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) said in a good opening speech, we are all united in this place in our desire to see improvements in the palliative care system, but I feel compelled to make this simple point of fact. Studies and research show that in jurisdictions and countries around the world that have introduced an assisted dying/assisted suicide law, the investment in and the quality of palliative care has declined, relative to those that do not have an assisted dying/assisted suicide law. That is for reasons that are fairly comprehensible. That is a fact. I implore the House: let us fix our palliative care system before we consider opening up the law on assisted dying.

The United Kingdom is, of course, the birthplace of the hospice movement, and we have some of the best palliative care services and specialists in the world, but

as we have heard this evening, our system simply is not working. We have demand for palliative care and hospice services on a scale that was never anticipated in the post-war years in which the NHS was developed. The challenges of growing demand have been sadly exacerbated by decisions that the Government have made, as we have heard.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): On Friday, I went to St Barnabas hospice in Lincoln, our local hospice, which does wonderful work, and talked to its chief executive officer, who is tearing his hair out. Because of the national insurance increase, he is losing £300,000 a year. He pays his nurses less than the local hospital; he has to. He is literally funding the NHS and cutting his own service in the hospice. I beg the Government to think again about the national insurance increase on hospices.

Danny Kruger: My right hon. Friend makes absolutely the right point. It echoes the experience of hospices across the country. Prospect House, which is on the edge of Swindon and is in my constituency of East Wiltshire, receives only 23% of its funding from the taxpayer. It faced a significant deficit this year, so it took immense pains and steps to bridge its funding shortfall. There was a huge response to a public fundraising appeal, and it raised over £170,000 from the local community, but that was before the Budget. The effect of the national insurance increase alone on Prospect House is £170,000, so the public's generosity has been entirely wiped away by the Chancellor, and Prospect House is back exactly where it was.

Julia's House in Devizes is a children's hospice, and the most wonderful, moving place that I have visited in my time as an MP. It has had a similar experience. It gets only 8% of its budget from the taxpayer. Its deficit has gone up from £900,000 before the Budget to £1.1 million now. We therefore desperately need a comprehensive review of palliative care.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), and to Baroness Finlay in the other place. They are leading a review of palliative care, with a view to coming forward soon with recommendations for the Government on how to improve the system. Indeed, thanks to Lady Finlay's amendment to the last Government's Health and Care Act 2022, integrated care boards are required to commission palliative care. Unfortunately, no money was attached to that amendment, and as we have heard, the way in which some ICBs commission care is not good enough. I regret, for instance, that the ICB in our area will not commission Julia's House, the children's hospice that I mentioned, so we need a better commissioning model.

I take issue with the point made by the hon. Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) that ICBs cannot find the money for these services in their budgets. They could if they did their job properly and commissioned services locally. They should be able to move budgets around. The fact is that if proper investment is made in palliative care, money is saved elsewhere in the NHS; that is the crucial point. Expensive bed stays in hospital would be reduced, as would demand on ambulances and other services. It should be possible to improve palliative care within the ICBs' current envelope.

We do not want a system of enforced uniformity, or a great new national bureaucracy. I am concerned to hear some hon. Members suggest that we nationalise

the system; I do not think that is right. We need to ensure that ICBs can do the job that they need to do, and that hospices can innovate as they want.

8.49 pm

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): The crisis in funding, and the postcode lottery and health inequalities faced by many families, particularly in accessing hospice and palliative care, weighed heavily on my decision to vote as I did in the debate on the assisted dying Bill. That is why I am sincerely grateful to the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for securing this very important debate.

I was profoundly moved by the extraordinary work of our local hospice, Compton Care, when I recently visited its new hub in the Scotlands, Low Hill, just before Christmas. I was deeply moved by the work that its people do to support families who turn to them at their darkest time. I saw outstanding medical care provided by specialist medical teams and counsellors, but also the wraparound support that they provide—everything from creative therapies and grief counselling to bespoke support for bereaved children. There were also those quiet, crucial moments when the specialist staff knew just what to say, just when things were so difficult for families—moments that are unimaginable to navigate.

That is why the Government's extra £100 million for hospices across the country and their extra £26 million for children's hospice services are essential. It is the biggest investment in a generation, a clear sign of this Government's commitment to everyone having access to high-quality end of life care. It will result in hospices such as Compton Care reaching more people, especially in communities that have long felt the brunt of deepening health inequalities. It will provide much welcome support for families across Wolverhampton and Willenhall, and ensure that no one faces the end of life without the care, comfort and compassion that they deserve. I welcome the Government's investment boost in hospice and palliative care, but I will continue to advocate for equity in care.

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): May I intervene?

Mrs Brackenridge: I have nearly finished, thank you. I will never lose sight of constituents' fundamental right to dignity and care, which matters right until the very end.

8.52 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I start by thanking the compassionate, dedicated and caring hospice staff and volunteers who, year round, support patients and their families through some of the most difficult moments of their life. I welcome this debate, which highlights the need for greater, more consistent Government support for the work of delivering that vital care.

Most pressingly, we must ensure that fiscal policies do not negatively impact our hospices, because hospices are pillars of our healthcare system. They support over 300,000 people annually and provide not just outstanding clinical care, but emotional and psychological support. I have seen at first hand the many ways in which hospices work to bring some sense of comfort and normality at a very distressing time, from providing group activities and special events to creating quiet spaces for reflection. Hospices are not just care providers; they are vital

partners in the healthcare system, reducing pressure on NHS services by offering specialist in-patient care and community-based services. Hospices prevent unnecessary A&E visits and facilitate timely hospital discharges.

When hospices are forced to cut services, the burden on the NHS only grows. That makes long-term support for hospices not just compassionate but practical. A constituent recently contacted me to tell me about her husband's experience. Unfortunately, there was no room for her husband at my constituency's local hospice, the Princess Alice hospice. My constituent strongly believes that her husband's end of life experience would have been more peaceful and less painful had he been admitted there. Instead, he was left at home, in extreme pain for hours. The community nurses did eventually come to administer pain relief, shortly after which he passed away, but my constituent has expressed that the whole experience was deeply traumatic for her and her children, and urged me to call for more funding, so that other families can be spared such distress.

Despite the crucial role of hospices, the hospice sector is at breaking point. As a fundraiser, I work closely with hospices, and I know just how precarious their financial situation is. Many people do not realise how little of hospice care is funded by the Government. On average, the Government fund only one third; for the remaining funding, hospices are reliant on charitable donations. This imbalance leaves hospices vulnerable to financial crises as, thanks to rising costs and inconsistent donations, they fail to bridge the gap. This funding model does not work. One in five UK hospices has had to cut services in the last year, or was planning to, due to insufficient funding, and this trend will continue unless action is taken.

Although I welcome the Government's £126 million package for hospices, we must see it for what it is—a stopgap, not a long-term solution. We need a plan to put hospices on a sustainable, fair and consistent financial footing. A long-term reform of hospice funding is needed as part of the NHS's 10-year plan. Hospices such as Shooting Star and Princess Alice embody the values of compassion and community. They provide comfort where there is pain, hope where there is despair and dignity where there is loss. It is our responsibility to ensure that they continue this vital work.

8.55 pm

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) and the Backbench Business Committee for enabling this important debate.

This morning, I visited Myton hospices' Rugby Myton support hub, which, together with its two in-patient centres and teams providing many distinct services, gives valued care to my constituents in Rugby. I want to put on record my sincere gratitude to all the staff and volunteers. The team this morning briefed me on the services they provide at the hub, which I will briefly mention. They provide coffee mornings, counselling for patients and families, opportunities to enjoy arts and crafts and to hear music, physical exercise sessions, self-care advice, support for carers and much more. All are delivered with kindness, and all are supported by an amazing array of volunteers. This is all backed by incredible fundraisers, including the former mayor of Rugby, Councillor Maggie O'Rourke; Myton was her

[John Slinger]

mayoral charity recently. Local communities often rise to the challenge of fundraising, and they recently helped Myton to secure £240,000 to recruit, train and pay five registered nurses, so that more people in Coventry and Warwickshire can access a hospice bed.

I hope the Minister will consider three points that arose from my visit. First, volunteers and good will are of course wonderful, but they can only go so far, so any additional long-term funding from the local ICB or central Government would go a very long way, particularly given that the charitable nature of hospices means that there can be a multiplier effect. Secondly, to dispel myths, today I saw that hospices are not just about the last few weeks or days of life. They give a huge range of support to people with life-limiting conditions, so that they can live better until the very end of their life. Furthermore, they are there to support families, and hospices wish to engage with people much earlier in their illnesses. Thirdly, on communications, I hope the Minister will consider the point that despite the best efforts of organisations such as Myton hospice, many people do not understand what hospices are and what services they provide, or that they are free and are not private providers in the traditional sense. What more can the Government do to help hospices educate the public about their services, particularly now that there is more of a spotlight on palliative care, following the recent vote on the Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater)?

8.58 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Hospices in Devon were already struggling before the Government's Budget last autumn, which introduced a hike in employers' national insurance. To talk first about the national picture, we have heard that a third of funding for hospices tends to come from the state, through the NHS. However, in Devon, it is less than a fifth. For Hospiscare, a charity based in Exeter, the figure is 18%, while for Seaton Hospice at Home and Sidmouth Hospice at Home, the figure is 0%; they do not receive any funding at all from NHS Devon.

Last year, I got together with Ben Bradshaw and Simon Jupp, the former MPs for Exeter and for East Devon. We put aside our political differences—Simon Jupp and I were contesting the seat of Honiton and Sidmouth at the time—wrote to the chair of NHS Devon, the brilliant Sarah Wollaston, and secured an extra £500,000 for hospice care in Devon. None the less, the charity Hospiscare still has a deficit of £2.5 million per year.

Following the national insurance announcement last autumn, *The Guardian* reported in mid-November that Whitehall was considering options to relieve the financial pressure on hospices. It suggested that civil servants were weighing up the possibilities of offsetting the NI rise, funding hospice nursing staff directly, or setting up a "direct funding pot" for hospices. Following the announcement on 19 December and the Christmas gift of capital funding for hospices, it seems that the Government chose the direct funding pot for hospices. The problem with the additional capital funding is that a lot of hospices do not have physical buildings. They do not have infrastructure. They provide nursing services and hospice at home, so they cannot simply offset

day-to-day spending with that capital spending. They are completely missing out, and that is the experience for Seaton hospice at home and Sidmouth hospice at home services in my east Devon constituency.

In conclusion, these charities step in where the NHS does not. Providing care is central to the Government's vision of shifting treatment from hospitals to communities, yet the current trajectory seems to be forcing patients back into overstretched, acute hospitals.

9 pm

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for securing this debate and for his excellent and moving opening speech. Hospices across the country care for hundreds of thousands of people living with conditions that limit their lives or mean they face their lives coming to an end.

I wish to put on record my thanks to two hospices that provide crucial services for people in my area. Ellenor is a specialist palliative care provider for adults and children based in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Dr Sullivan). Since 1985 it has been providing hospice care for those who need it most, and it recently opened a new wellbeing centre, which is a hugely welcome addition to its facilities. I also pay tribute to Demelza, which has children's hospices in the constituencies of my hon. Friends the Members for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna) and for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford). Demelza supports families who are going through what I can only imagine are some of the most difficult circumstances I can possibly think of, where children are facing serious or life-limiting conditions.

Given the importance of such services, I understand the high degree of concern from the sector before the Government's announcement of further funding last month, with the NHS England children's hospice grant not having been confirmed at that point for 2024-25. I therefore join hon. Members who have welcomed the 19 December announcement by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care of £100 million in funding improvements for hospices, such as updated IT and improved facilities for patients and visitors. I also very much welcome the news that hospices for children and young people will receive £26 million in revenue funding for the next financial year. Hospice UK has welcomed that funding, saying that it will

"bring clarity to critically important services for children with life-limiting illnesses."

Mr Angus MacDonald: What does the hon. Member think about the many hospices that do not need the capital but are desperate for the income? I would be interested in his answer.

Jim Dickson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The capital funding will be of immense help to a wide variety of hospices in ensuring that they can upgrade their operation so that they are less reliant on revenue funding from the charity sector and from the NHS. We need a sustainable funding model, and I know the Minister will come back on that at the end of the debate. Finally, let us wish Hospice UK, individual hospices, and our NHS every success with their amazing care for all who need their services, and hope that they will be able to find a sustainable financial future as a result of the Government's work.

9.4 pm

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for bringing forward this incredibly important debate. Anyone who has been paying attention to my contributions in this place will not be surprised that I am once again expressing my deepest possible concerns about St Raphael's hospice in my constituency. Its case is emblematic of the problems across this undervalued and dramatically important sector.

One of my first visits after being elected as the MP in July was to St Raph's hospice, where I saw the incredible care that it offers to residents in my constituency and beyond. I have met people from the hospice several times since then, including just this morning, and it is clear that while the Secretary of State's £100 million announcement is welcome, it simply does not go far enough. The funding is restricted to capital expenditure fractions, such as refurbishments and digital services. While undoubtedly important to modernise and update the capability of our hospices, the funding does not address their immediate financial hardship, especially in the context of the Chancellor's Budget.

St Raph's is set to face an estimated £140,000 increase in staff costs this coming year due to the rise in employer national insurance contributions. This burden only adds to the significant strain on the hospice, which is currently funded by the NHS for just 28% of its budget. It is therefore reliant on the generosity of charitable donations for the remainder. If the Government fail to see sense and exempt hospices from this hike, structural deficits will only continue to grow in the sector, pushing many over the cliff edge altogether and forcing those who remain open to cut their services to the bone.

While the announcement of additional funding is appreciated, it does not address the root of the problem. The Government's approach is dangerously akin to tackling a leaking roof with a mop and bucket. The Secretary of State spoke last week about the need to shift the focus of healthcare from the hospital to the community, yet I fear their treatment of the hospice sector has done exactly the opposite. Due to the limited funding that St Raph's receives, it has been forced to cut its hospice at home scheme, a vital service where staff directly attend to patients in their own homes in the local community. Those on the Government Front Bench say they want community-based palliative care like that under the hospice at home scheme, but the scheme has been cut further due to their actions.

These issues show why they must bring forward a long-term funding arrangement for hospices, if the Government intend to keep their promise. My Hospices and Health Care (Report on Funding) Bill, presented last year and due for Second Reading in July, sets out ways for the Government to consider those options to deliver a long-term funding deal. However, I sincerely hope that by July the Government will have listened and the Bill will not need to be debated at all. I urge them to please make my Bill completely redundant.

9.7 pm

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for securing this debate. Like many Members here, I am here to talk about my local hospice. Just over the constituency border in Whittington, St Giles hospice has been doing its vital

work for more than 40 years. However, 2024 was a challenging year for the hospice, with rising costs, plus the impact of the cost of living crisis making fundraising more difficult, leading it to make some impossibly hard decisions last summer. St Giles had to close one of its wings and make a number of redundancies among its clinical staff. That was due not to reduced need across Lichfield, Burntwood, the surrounding villages and further afield, but only to the financial situation that the hospice faced.

I commend my constituent Sean Collins, who is leading St Giles's urgent funding appeal. The hospice supported Sean and his children following the loss of their mother and wife, Felicity, at just 38 years old. I am not sure I would be strong enough to turn that tragedy into something as positive as Sean has, but he has all my support.

The generous donors to St Giles do so much to care for people they have never met with their donations. In a recent meeting with Elinor Eustace, the CEO of the hospice, she mentioned how much she values all that they do, but said that she does not want to have a fully funded model, because of the value that fundraising brings to the entire community around the hospice. Having said that, Government support is essential to making sure that hospices across the country can continue to do everything they do for all our communities, so I welcome the £100 million of additional funding that the Government announced just before Christmas. However, we must find ways to ensure that all hospices remain sustainable in the long term.

St Giles receives just 18% of its funding from the NHS, which is less than £1 in every £5 when the national average is £1 in every £3. Levelling that playing field cannot come fast enough. In addition, St Giles has to deal with five different integrated care boards. That is five different NHS organisations for five different geographies, all with different funding formulas, different grant processes, different reporting mechanisms, different key performance indicators and different timescales. That is all for grants that add up to nothing more than an administrative nightmare. Simplifying and standardising that process will ensure that St Giles can spend less time securing grants from the NHS and more time on caring for the community in my constituency and further afield. I ask the Minister to look very closely at that point, because there is a real opportunity to secure significant benefit for hospices across the country.

9.9 pm

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I thank the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for bringing this important debate to the House tonight. I congratulate him, but it is unfortunate that it was not held in Government time, because this issue was raised on a number of occasions during the debate on assisted dying.

The debate has highlighted the importance of the discussion around palliative care. The All Ireland Institute of Hospice and Palliative Care conducted a recent study of 500 people in Northern Ireland, which indicated that more than one in three think that they only had days to live if their doctor or healthcare professional talked to them about palliative care, and more than one in four would feel that their doctor was giving up on them if they talked about referring them to palliative care. This debate and the previous debates that we have had raise

[Robin Swann]

the importance of these discussions with family and the wider community. Work has been done in Northern Ireland on conversations about advanced care planning, where families, health professionals and all parts of the society are involved in those open conversations.

Much has been said about the fundraising model for hospices and palliative care providers, and it is no different in Northern Ireland. We talk about the need for a funding model, but the Department of Health and the entire health service in Northern Ireland have been relying on year-on-year budgets since 2016. That puts stress not only on our national health service, but on palliative care providers, hospices, GPs and community pharmacies. There is a desire from the rest of health and social care in Northern Ireland to see a recurrent, guaranteed budget that we could use to make those transformation decisions.

I pay tribute to the hospices and palliative care providers in Northern Ireland, especially the people who work in them. Much has been said today about funding care models, how they are managed and all the rest of it, but often we forget that at the heart of every care package, every delivery, every door that is knocked and opened and every cup of tea that is made for someone in one of those conditions are those healthcare professionals. They have the strength and the ability to move on to the next patient and family, to give them the same level of dedicated professional support.

Finally, I pay tribute to the staff in the Macmillan specialist palliative care unit in Antrim area hospital. I had the honour and privilege of visiting them many times as Health Minister in Northern Ireland, but especially when they were providing support and care to Shirley Smyth almost this time last year—a fantastic supporter and grandmother of one of my councillors, and a fantastic lady.

9.13 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I join colleagues in congratulating the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) on securing this important debate.

Bolton hospice had been facing a funding gap of £1.2 million, which could have meant cutting as many as a third of its beds. We should remind ourselves what each bed and every penny lost actually means: in many cases, the real-life impact of these numbers is the prolonged suffering of the most unimaginable kind for the individual, and the heart-rending experience of having to witness it for family and friends. Let us not forget that 300,000 people depend on hospices every year.

Bolton hospice, in part following a fantastic campaign from *The Bolton News* and the huge generosity of the people of Bolton, was able to cut its deficit to £400,000—still a large amount. I did my level best to contribute to that campaign by traipsing up Mount Kilimanjaro. Frankly, hospices are so important to so many people that they should not have to rely on the kindness of strangers. That is why I was pleased to learn just before Christmas that Bolton hospice is in line to receive a slice of the once-in-a-generation £100 million national funding boost announced by the Health Secretary. Such investment pays for itself in many ways, by supporting the Government's plan to shift more care into the community and keep people who need not be there out of hospital, and, importantly,

by ensuring that people can die in a place of their choice with the care that they need. However, more funding will inevitably be required as we cope with an ageing population with increasingly complex care needs. Given the pressures on public finances and the cost of living crisis, we must look for creative and innovative solutions.

With that in mind, I want to raise the work of my constituents Corin and Tricia Dalby, who, through tireless campaigning, have secured the support of 30 hospices, 36,000 petition signatures and more than 100 parliamentarians in raising the profile of hospices' financial pressures, with a petition presented to No. 10 Downing Street last month. Corin and Tricia's petition calls Government to redirect the first £100 million of fines levied by the Financial Conduct Authority on banks and other financial services firms to the hospice sector. Since April 2012, the money collected from FCA fines has gone to the Treasury, and can then go to charitable donations. We need to think carefully about how to ensure hospices are put on the sustainable funding platform they so desperately need, but I urge my colleagues, including the Minister, to carefully consider this proposal.

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to mention the private Member's Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) on assisted dying. Palliative care provides the relief so urgently needed for hundreds of thousands of people around the country and their families, and we absolutely must make sure it is the best it can possibly be.

9.16 pm

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Like other Members, I begin by paying tribute to our hospices and to everyone who works and indeed volunteers in palliative and end of life care, providing such amazing support to patients and their loved ones around their death—that most difficult time of life—and helping people to have a good death. As many Members have said, that work is so crucial. I would particularly like to mention St Michael's hospice, Hereford, in my constituency. It is a place I have had an association with for many years, as it has provided amazing care to friends of mine who have died there. It is so well loved in the community.

Is it not such a shame, as so many colleagues have said today, that palliative care is so dependent on charitable funding? As the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) said, it is integral to our healthcare system—except it is not, because it is not fully funded by our healthcare system. It is not actually free at the point of need, except thanks to the grace and kindness of strangers and charitable funding. Government Members have made mention many times this evening of the £100 million capital injection from the Government, which is absolutely welcome; it has been so frequently mentioned, in fact, that one might think the Whips have gently encouraged its mentioning. However, the problem is that this £100 million is a short-term capital injection, when what is needed is a long-term revenue funding solution.

Despite the amazing efforts of fundraisers, revenue budgets in hospices are under extreme pressure. That has been made worse by the rise in employer national insurance contributions; St Michaels will have an additional bill of £240,000 next year because of it. That is a problem. The current funding model for hospice care is a problem.

It is good that there is now a statutory requirement for ICBs to fund palliative care, but there is a complete lack of parity across the country. Hospices have to negotiate individually with ICBs all across the country every year. A hospice leader said to me that they have no sight of the future; another said that when they are considering redundancies, it is no use telling people they are going to be resurfacing the car park with the new capital funding.

We need a sustainable revenue funding solution for hospices—a clear, fair, multi-year, long-term funding solution—with parity across the country, to provide those doing that amazing work to support patients and the patients themselves with the support they need and deserve.

9.19 pm

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Twenty years ago this month, both my parents died aged 60, of cancer. They died just one week apart, but that is where the similarities ended. My father died a horrible death, receiving very poor—if any—palliative care. My mother won the postcode lottery, if you like, and passed away in the Royal Stoke, in Stoke-on-Trent, where she received superb care and died a dignified death. I live with the twin legacies of those deaths. I stress to the Minister the importance of ensuring that trained palliative care staff are spread equally throughout the country. It is vital. It makes a difference.

Stoke-on-Trent has also won the postcode lottery in a way, with our excellent hospice, the Dougie Mac. Having merged with the Donna Louise children's hospice, it now provides care for all people of all ages across north Staffordshire. It provides many innovative services, including a dementia care service and a rapid response ambulance service, which responds for patients at the end of their lives. Instead of taking them to A&E, they travel to the hospice. That saves the local hospital 350 A&E visits a year, saving on ambulances and saving the trust money. Unfortunately, the hospice does not receive any funding to help deliver that service. I want to take the opportunity to put on the record my thanks to the chief executive, who I spoke to at great length recently, to all the staff across both sites, in Blurton and Trentham in my constituency, for all the work they do, and to all the amazing volunteers in the shops throughout Stoke-on-Trent.

I welcome the Government's commitment to funding hospices and the £100 million injection, but like everyone else I support ending the postcode lottery. We must end inequality in the delivery of service and we must provide a more sustainable model in future.

9.21 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): Hospices and palliative care are not just about easing physical pain; they are about dignity, compassion and humanity. How we care for those approaching the end of their life reflects who we are as a society. As has been mentioned by right hon. and hon. Members, palliative care should be an integral part of our wider NHS. Over half a million people die each year in the UK, yet too many of them do so in conditions that fail to meet their needs or respect their wishes. Hospices, the very sanctuaries of peace and care, are stretched to breaking point. Palliative care teams staffed by dedicated professionals and volunteers do extraordinary work, but they are increasingly underfunded, under-resourced and overlooked in policy debates.

Those challenges are not the fault of those on the frontline; they stem from systemic issues in how we prioritise end of life care. Funding for hospices comes primarily from charitable donations, with only about a third provided by the NHS. That is not sustainable and nor is it fair. We would not dream of asking our hospitals or schools to rely on bake sales and fundraisers for their survival, so why should hospices be any different?

I do not have hospices in my constituency, but I want to pay tribute to the local hospices that care for my constituents. The Kirkwood hospice has budgeted for a near £1 million deficit for 2023-24 and it expects the same level of deficits to continue in subsequent years. The picture is the same for the Forget Me Not children's hospice in Kirklees, which also faces a £1 million shortfall and has put out an urgent appeal for public donations.

Another issue is access. Palliative care should be a universal right, yet we know that availability varies widely depending on where we live, and one's age and condition. Too many people, particularly in deprived areas or from minority communities, face barriers to receiving the care they need. That inequality is unacceptable in a society that prides itself on fairness and must be addressed by the Government.

In conclusion, we must ensure secure, long-term funding for hospices and palliative care services. That requires a shift in how we think about end of life care: not as an optional extra, but as a core part of our healthcare system. The Government must step up and provide the sustainable financial support these services need to thrive now and for the future, and be able to support all communities equally.

9.24 pm

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Let me first pay tribute to the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for bringing this debate to the House.

Hospices such as Compton Care in my constituency provide invaluable palliative care, not only in terms of pain and symptom control but in providing psychological, social and spiritual support, support for people who wish to die at home, and rehabilitation, financial advice and support for family members, including bereavement support. However, the funding that hospices receive from ICBs across the country is inconsistent, and often does not reflect the cost of the services that they provide. As has already been mentioned, only a third of hospice funding comes from the Government, with the rest coming from charitable donations. As of May last year, at least a fifth of UK hospices had either cut their services in the previous year or were planning to do so.

When hospices cut services the need for care is still there, but it has to be met by the NHS. If they are given the long-term support they need, that can ease the pressure on the NHS. Sector leaders estimate that the need for palliative care in the UK will increase by 25% over the next 25 years. However, I welcome the £100 million that the Government have provided, which will improve buildings, equipment, accommodation and digital upgrades, as well as the £26 million revenue funding for children and young people's hospices that will be provided in 2025-26.

There has been a lot of discussion about assisted dying this evening and when we discussed the assisted dying Bill, there was a lot of discussion about palliative care. Now we have an opportunity to take action,

[*Warinder Juss*]

and we need to seize it to improve palliative care. If the assisted dying Bill does become law, we need to make sure that people in the future do not have to make a decision between assisted dying and palliative care.

9.26 pm

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Palliative and end of life care is about dignity, compassion, and giving every person their right to live their final days in comfort and peace, as the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) observed when compassionately describing his parents' last moments. However, I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) that access to high-quality care is a postcode lottery across the UK. Only a third of local NHS areas in England can provide 24/7 end of life care at home, which leaves nearly 100,000 people every year without the care and support that they deserve during their most vulnerable moments.

We must address this disparity. Every patient deserves a personalised care plan that respects their wishes and supports their physical, emotional, social and spiritual needs. Care plans should also offer non-clinical help, such as financial advice and opportunities for people to participate in meaningful activities while they can still do so; and let us not forget the families who require respite care during this period.

Hospices play a vital role in such care, but, unlike the NHS, hospice care is not fully funded by the Government. Hospices receive only about a third of their income from the state; the rest is raised through charitable donations, which is pitiful. This model is unsustainable. As a result of rising costs, which have not been helped by the national insurance increases, the sector faces a £60 million deficit this year alone. As demand for hospice care grows owing to an ageing population and advances in medicine that help children with life-limiting conditions to live longer, the strain on hospices will only increase. Without immediate action they will struggle to meet this growing demand, leaving more people without the care that they deserve.

We need bold and decisive steps to fix that. First, we need fair and sustainable funding. The Government must create a national plan to secure consistent funding for hospices. Emergency funding is urgently needed. Secondly, we need a national standard for care. National quality standards and agreed outcomes for palliative and end of life care are essential. Every integrated care board must meet minimum standards to provide fair access to care nationwide. Thirdly, we need support for underserved communities in areas where people are currently missing out. There should be access to palliative care in homes, care facilities and hospitals, ensuring that no one is left behind. Fourthly, the £26 million children's hospice grant must be ringfenced.

Let me end by thanking the incredible teams at the two hospices in my city that serve my constituency: LOROS, which assists 2,500 people a year, and Rainbows, a fabulous organisation that cares for young people with life-limiting conditions. I want to thank them both.

9.29 pm

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for bringing forward this important debate, and all hon. Members for speaking with such compassion.

Although the £100 million for hospice capital projects is to be welcomed, it is cash that is most needed. Julia's House, a children's hospice in my constituency that has already been mentioned, will find itself out of pocket by £242,000 per year because of the rise in national insurance. Dorothy House hospice, which is also in my constituency, will lose even more. That is a lot of sponsored walks and parachute jumps—perhaps too many—if the hospices are to avoid cutting their services. I urge the Minister to think again, and to provide the funds that our hospices need.

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

9.30 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for securing today's important debate, and all hon. Members for approaching the conversation with the compassion and thoughtfulness that this topic deserves.

Examples shared across the House show that hospices are a vital part of our healthcare system. They provide outstanding care for patients approaching the end of their lives, offering dignity, comfort and support to families, and they are often driven by hundreds of volunteers, alongside the paid staff. Hospices will play a key role in meeting this Government's objective to move care from hospitals to the community. This debate is very timely, given that the front pages of the newspapers are reporting today that half a million people were left languishing on trolleys in A&E and in corridors in 2024 because there were not enough beds to admit them.

Hospices, such as the extraordinary St Wilfrid's in my constituency of Chichester, are the cornerstone of community care. I was blown away during my recent visit to St Wilfrid's, and I am not ashamed to admit that I was brought to tears by the accounts of the family members, patients and staff I met that day. I applaud the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) for her show of emotion, because it is an emotive topic. St Wilfrid's provides comfort and compassion to patients and their families during life's most challenging moments—both directly in the calm and idyllic surroundings of the hospice and out in the community, providing palliative care for 300 people in the comfort of their own homes. It is St Wilfrid's belief that everybody should be afforded a good death, and it strives to ensure that there is beauty in every day for patients and their loved ones, yet its service is being crippled by rising costs and a lack of sufficient Government support.

Hospices are in the process of setting their upcoming budgets, and many are having to make difficult long-term decisions to cut palliative care because they lack a long-term solution to address the growing financial strain. As the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) mentioned, it is all well and good being able to say you have a lovely car park when you do not have any nurses to park in it. Only 17% of the overall cost of St Wilfrid's hospice is currently covered by NHS grant funding—well below the minimum requirement across the country.

One of the biggest components of hospice costs is the salary of their expert clinical and other staff. Hospices are trying to match NHS salary increases to ensure that staff

can afford to stay with them, and to remain competitive. In addition, they are now burdened with paying increased national insurance contributions, whereas direct NHS providers are exempt. For St Wilfrid's, the rise in national insurance contributions will cost an additional £210,000, which is a significant financial burden. Although we Liberal Democrats and hospices alike welcomed the capital investment announcement in December 2024, that funding does not address the challenges of day-to-day spend, so there is still a vast gulf between rising expenses and available income. As the hon. Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) said, the funding must be the start, not the end.

Hospice UK has warned that around 300 hospice in-patient beds—14% of the total—are currently closed or out of use due to a lack of funding and chronic staff shortages, meaning that fewer patients are able to access the end of life care that they need at one of the most vulnerable times in their lives.

My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) mentioned the Marie Curie report, as did other Members across the House, which stated that one in four people who need hospice care cannot currently get it. The term “bed blocking” is not one I am particularly comfortable with, but if adequate palliative care is unavailable in the community or in a hospice, those people will remain stuck in hospital, and those hospitals cannot provide the expert care that a hospice can. Our hospices are ready and willing to take on those patients, but they need the support of this Government to do so.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler), who brought forward this debate, said, people do not want to die in hospital. They want to die at home or in a specialised setting such as a hospice. That is why the Liberal Democrats are calling for hospices to be exempted from the rise in national insurance contributions. This targeted measure would provide immediate relief for a sector that is struggling under the weight of rising costs, and prevent further reductions in capacity or even closures.

We must think long term. Hospices need a sustainable funding model that guarantees they can continue their vital work of providing care for patients, supporting families and easing the pressure on the NHS. Hospices must also be a part of the conversation in the Government's upcoming 10-year plan for the NHS, and that must include sustainable hospice funding reform. Examples from across the House today showed a shared recognition of the importance of hospice care. Now we need the Government to match that recognition with action for the patients, for the families and for a health service that depends on hospices.

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

9.36 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for securing this debate. I was going to test the patience of the House by reading out all the hospices that have been named, but we got to 45 and I realise that time is short, so I will not do so. It is, however, a testament to those hospices' services that so many Members have spoken so fondly about them.

On behalf of His Majesty's Opposition, I would like to discuss three areas: the conversation about death; palliative services and the ecosystem; and some specific technical questions. It is rare in this House that we debate a topic that impacts literally everyone, and it is an honour to play my part in highlighting something I have long argued is not talked about nearly enough—that is, death and dying. We all know that the only certainty is death, but there is a variable, which is the quality of death. That has been the focus of today's debate. After all, it was Woody Allen who said:

“I'm not afraid of death, I just don't want to be there when it happens.”

Palliative care services dedicate their lives to making sure that people who will die do so with dignity. Many people think of hospitals or hospices in relation to death, and their staff do fantastic work, but we must not forget the pivotal role played by the likes of district nurses and GPs in ensuring there is palliative care in our nation. In my constituency, I am blessed with hospice care from Loros for adults and Rainbows for children, both of which are much loved by the public and, most importantly, supported by armies of volunteers. Those people deserve this House's and the public's recognition and respect for what they contribute to our society.

Dying can be a difficult subject to talk about, as I know from my clinical days, but that does not make it any less important. I pay tribute to this House for the way in which it handled and discussed the assisted dying debate. Whatever position people take, it is fantastic to see a national debate now taking place across dinner tables up and down this country. So my first question to the Government is: what is being done to ensure that people look to plan their deaths better?

When we talk about the wider ecosystem, we have to consider the roles of hospices, hospitals and primary care providers such as district nurses, who are all key stakeholders, and the nature of how they have ended up being involved in palliative care and the different journeys they have made to do so. That is beyond the scope of this debate, but it is important because it informs the make-up and patchwork of palliation across this country. As we have heard, there is a balance between charitable funding and NHS funding, and even this House is divided on what that formula should look like and whether it should be solely state funded or charitable.

My second question to the Government is: will they consider consulting on a long-term funding model that allows this debate to take place, so that we have a better balance between the two? Building on that, looking at it from the clinical point of view, part of the issue at play is what the provision should even look like.

My third question to the Government is: will they commit to establishing agreed basic standard criteria for service-level provision, and to getting a national agreement on the provision of palliative care services and what they look like for whatever a person should choose?

On the record of the last Government, we legislated in the Health and Social Care Act 2022 to ensure that commissioning was taking place. As part of the NHS response to covid, £350 million was given to support hospices in those difficult times. NHS England also put in grant funding for a 24/7 single point of access for palliative care support. As we have heard, the last Government also increased the funding for the children's

[Dr Luke Evans]

hospice grant from £15 million in 2020-21 to £25 million, and I am pleased to see the Government continue that trajectory. To help manage staff, the last Government brought forward the first ever NHS workforce plan, and I commend this Government for continuing to commit to that.

With the debate about assisted dying and the concerns expressed by the Health Secretary about provision, however, my fourth question to the Government is: what assessment have they made of the impact of assisted dying on provision? I believe the Secretary of State was commissioning work on this, so when will the results be released?

On assisted dying and the ability to provide the services, this is not the right place to suggest whether they are right or wrong, but whether or not the Bill passes, I hope we will not let it distract us from the mission of continuing to improve palliative care and end of life services, for which there is momentum in the House and among the general public.

On the specific questions from the sector, it would be remiss of me not to raise the concerns about Labour's Budget and its impact on the palliative care sector. The employer national insurance contribution increases are a tax on charities—fact. Charities are not covered by the NHS exemption. Hospices are charities, so they are being taxed—fact. GPs provide palliative care and support. They are not covered by the NHS exemption, so they are being taxed—fact.

Hospice UK has estimated that an additional £30 million will need to be found. This means that charities and non-profit organisations such as Sue Ryder, Macmillan and Marie Curie are being hit with additional wage bills, requiring more money just to provide the same level of care. The Government have said that they will give £100 million to hospices, but it has been made abundantly clear in this debate that it is for capital expenditure only, unless the Minister would like to correct me.

What assessment have the Government made of what the spending review will look like when it comes to palliation? It is hard not to see this as a Labour Government giving with one hand while taking with the other—taxing GPs and hospices in order to give them money back in a way that they do not want.

On staffing and contracts, some staff are employed by the NHS, while others are directly employed by the hospices. Have the Government made an assessment of the impact that will have on recruitment? For example, palliative care consultants face a postcode lottery of terms. Will the Government consider looking at that?

Palliative care consultants' contractual arrangements throw up another oddity in the sector: some NHS palliative care consultants have Crown indemnity, while others employed by hospices do not, costing them thousands of pounds. Will the Government consider looking at that?

On the allocation of funding process, Together for Short Lives has called on the Government to confirm whether the £26 million will be ringfenced for children's hospices and distributed centrally to avoid delays. Previously, the decision was made to give it to ICBs to better help local decision making. Although well meaning, that has resulted in delays. Are the Government aware of this issue and, if so, will the Minister commit to working to smooth it out?

There is much more that I could say on the topic, and I sure that the same is true for many others. The UK has an ageing population, and demand for palliative care will continue to rise in decades to come. In this House, we have the opportunity to make a difference for all who come after us. At the heart of looking after the dying is compassion. True compassion means not only feeling another's pain, but being moved to help relieve it. This Government have the power to do that, and I hope they will.

9.44 pm

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for securing the debate and making such a powerful and thoughtful opening speech. I thank hon. Members from across the House—there are too many to list. It would be impossible to capture the richness of the contributions made. Something like 28 Back-Bench Members made speeches—I am sure Madam Deputy Speaker will correct me if my numbers are not quite right. It was an excellent debate, and I thank everybody for their contribution. I thank all those who work or volunteer in the hospice and palliative care sector for the deeply compassionate care and support that they provide to patients, families and loved ones when they need it most.

This Government are committed to building a society in which every person receives high-quality, compassionate care, from diagnosis through to the end of life. We will shift more care out of hospitals and into the community, to ensure that patients and their families receive personalised care in the most appropriate setting. Palliative and end of life care services, including hospices, will have a vital role to play in that shift. The reality is that we have a mountain to climb. Our health and care services are on their knees, but this Government will strain every sinew to build them, and to create a health and care system that is once again fit for the future.

In England, integrated care boards are responsible for the commissioning of palliative and end of life care services to meet the needs of their local population. To support ICBs in that duty, NHS England has published statutory guidance and service specifications. While the majority of palliative and end of life care is provided by NHS staff and services, we recognise the vital part that voluntary sector organisations, including hospices, play in providing support to people at end of life, as well as to their loved ones.

Most hospices are charitable, independent organisations that receive some statutory funding for providing NHS services. The amount of funding each charitable hospice receives varies both within and between ICB areas. The variation is dependent on demand in the area, and on the totality and type of palliative and end of life care provision from NHS and non-NHS services, including charitable hospices, within each ICB footprint.

We understand the financial pressures that hospices have been facing, which is why last month I was truly proud that this Government announced the biggest investment in hospices in England in a generation. It will ensure that hospices in England can continue to deliver the highest-quality care possible for patients and their families and loved ones.

Danny Kruger: I also welcome that, and congratulate the Minister on getting that money out of the Treasury, but will he acknowledge that there is a difference between

capital and revenue? Hospices urgently need support for their day-to-day running costs, not just more money to support the capital. They also need capital support, but that is less crucial.

Stephen Kinnock: I take the hon. Gentleman's point, but hospices face a range of pressures. The capital expenditure injection that we have provided will help them in the round. Clearly, anything that helps a hospice with its budget in the round, be it capital or revenue, will help the hospice.

We are supporting the hospice sector through a £100 million capital funding boost for adult and children's hospices, to ensure that they have the best physical environment for care. There is also £26 million in revenue funding to support children and young people's hospices. The £100 million in capital funding will deliver much-needed improvements—from refurbishments to overhauling IT systems and better facilities for patients and visitors—during the remainder of 2024-25 and throughout 2025-26. The investment will help hospices to improve their buildings, equipment and accommodation, so that patients continue to receive the best care possible.

Hospices for children and young people will receive a further £26 million in revenue funding for '25-26 through what was known until recently as the children's hospice grant. That investment demonstrates the Government's recognition of the importance of integrating services to improve the treatment that patients receive. Furthermore, through our plans for neighbourhood health centres, we will drive the shift of care from hospitals to the community, which will bring together palliative care services, including hospices and community care services, so that people have the best access to treatment through joined-up services.

Warinder Juss: Money is not always the only solution, so will my hon. Friend confirm how the commission on palliative care that the Government announced last month will improve end of life care?

Stephen Kinnock: The Government announced a commission on the future of adult social care. A separate commission was announced by my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) on palliative care. We will certainly monitor the findings of that commission very closely.

We will set out details of the funding allocation and distribution mechanisms for both funding streams in the coming weeks.

Jim Shannon: In my contribution, I made the House aware that the Northern Ireland hospice has to cut its beds from seven to six for five days of the week, and at the weekend, there are only three. The Minister knows that I respect him greatly. It is all very well to have capital money available, but there has to be money to run the system and provide beds. Otherwise, we can buy beds, but might not be able to keep them and run a service. There must be something seriously wrong with what he is putting forward.

Stephen Kinnock: As I said in a previous answer, hospices face a range of pressures that financial contributions from the Government will help to ease. The funding will, of course, have a knock-on impact on hospices budgets in the round.

In spite of the record-breaking package that we have announced, we are certainly not complacent. There is more work to be done, and through the National Institute for Health and Care Research, the Department is investing £3 million in a policy research unit on palliative and end of life care. The unit launched in January 2024 and is building the evidence base that will inform our long-term strategy. A number of hon. Members requested a long-term strategy and plan, which is sorely missing after 14 years of Conservative neglect and incompetence. I agree that we need a long-term plan, and assure Members that conversations are taking place between my officials and NHS England. The research needs to be based on evidence and facts, which the unit will help us to get.

Dr Ben Spencer: It is important that this debate is not a political ding-dong, and I really appreciate the tone that all Members, including the Minister, have taken. On evidence and facts, will he look into the impact of the national insurance contribution rises on hospice care and provision, how many hospices are running a deficit, and how many will likely go into deficit as a result of his policies?

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to know that I have a section in my speech on employer national insurance contributions. I will get to it.

A number of colleagues raised concerns about regional variations. Facts and evidence are very important in that context. To address that issue, NHS England has developed a palliative and end of life care dashboard, which brings together all the relevant local data in one place. The dashboard helps commissioners to understand the palliative and end of life care needs of their local population, enabling ICBs to put plans in place to address, and track the improvement of, health inequalities, and to ensure that funding is distributed fairly, based on prevalence.

Gregory Stafford: Will the Minister give way?

Stephen Kinnock: I will, but I have to finish at 9.58 pm, so there is only about five minutes left of my contribution.

Gregory Stafford: It is generous of the Minister to give way, so I shall be brief. Would funding continue to be produced through ICBs, or will the system be funded centrally?

Stephen Kinnock: That is precisely the topic of conversation for officials in my Department and NHS England, who are looking at this issue in the round and deciding how we will work. We need a system that empowers ICBs to deliver at the coalface, but we also need accountability from the centre to ensure that things are delivered. Getting the balance right is never easy, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman will understand; that is what we are trying to navigate.

Alongside NHS England, my officials and I will continue to proactively engage with our stakeholders, including the voluntary sector and independent hospices, to understand the issues that they face. In fact, I will meet the major hospices and palliative care stakeholders, including Hospice UK, early next month to discuss potential solutions for longer-term sector sustainability. That will inform our 10-year health plan.

Munira Wilson: On the children's hospice grant, will the Minister confirm that it will be ringfenced, and that it will go beyond the one-year settlement?

Stephen Kinnock: Again, that is on the agenda for discussion with officials. Having inherited a disastrous situation, we are using 2025-26 to stabilise and to try to enable the sector to survive. The hon. Lady will understand that as well as doing that, we are looking at long-term reform solutions, but when we came into power on 4 July, it was one minute to midnight, and we had to rescue the sector. That is what we are doing, and we will look at the long-term issues in due course.

A number of Members have raised the concern around employers' national insurance contributions. Since we came to office in July, we have been completely focused on repairing the catastrophic legacy of 14 years of Conservative neglect and incompetence. The first step was to fix the foundations of the public finances at the autumn Budget, and that enabled the spending review settlement of a £22.6 billion increase in resource spending for our health and care system. Our approach to ENIC exemptions has been consistent with the Office for National Statistics definition and the approach taken by previous Governments. It does not include an exemption for independent contractors, including charities like hospices, although December's record funding announcement was a clear recognition of our commitment to financially supporting this vital sector more broadly.

I ask Opposition Members from all parties who luxuriate in criticising the means by which we have raised the record funding for hospices what they would do. How would they have raised the £22 billion that our autumn Budget delivered? Which taxes would they raise? Which public services would they cut? Answer comes there none. The Government recognise the need to protect the smallest businesses and charities, such as hospices, which is why we have more than doubled the employment allowance to £10,500, meaning that more than half of businesses and charities with ENIC liabilities either gain or see no change next year.

While the debate is not about assisted dying, I want to say a word on the matter. My hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) put forward

her Bill, and it has received its Second Reading. It is vital that our approach to end of life care and patient choice is holistic and driven by an in-depth understanding of patient need.

I thank everybody across the House for this excellent debate. Actions speak louder than words. This Government have acted to deliver the biggest financial contribution to hospices in a generation.

9.57 pm

Mr Kohler: I thank everyone for contributing today. This is a vital issue, and the sheer number of Members who spoke at such short notice shows how important it is to the House. We have heard many excellent contributions, but I will not try your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker, by listing those who spoke. The one motif running through the speeches was the need for a long-term funding plan. I heard what the Minister said about the £3 million NIHR investment and establishing a long-term strategy. I fear that it sounds like a plan for a plan, but I look forward to the 10-year health plan, because we absolutely need a strategy for the next 10 years, not the next two years, and I will hold him to his word.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered hospice and palliative care.

Business without Debate

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Ordered,

That Ms Julie Minns be discharged from the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee and Mike Reader be added.—*(Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)*

WELSH AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Aphra Brandreth be discharged from the Welsh Affairs Committee and Simon Hoare be added.—*(Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)*

Sixth-form College Strikes: Sussex

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

10 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): In my constituency, our young people are fortunate to have several highly regarded sixth-form options, including three brilliant colleges just over the constituency boundary in Brighton, Hove and Horsham. Varndean is one of only a handful of state-funded colleges offering the prestigious international baccalaureate; students at BHASVIC—Brighton, Hove and Sussex sixth-form college—received over 50 offers to study at Oxford and Cambridge last year; and Collyer's has the best results in west Sussex and is in the top 15 colleges nationally for value added.

Since late November, those three local colleges have been among 32 across England, including one in the Minister's constituency, that have held seven strike days—four before Christmas and, to date, three in January. I secured this debate having already submitted written parliamentary questions, the answers to which further frustrated those caught up in the dispute. In my opinion, the Government have dropped the ball on fairly and adequately funding non-academised sixth-form colleges. I feel that teachers are being treated unfairly and that students in Mid Sussex and beyond are being badly failed as a result.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for raising this issue, which also affects Scarborough sixth-form college in my constituency. There are high levels of deprivation in parts of Scarborough, and the sixth-form college is a key route to higher education or employment opportunities for young people. Will she join me in praising the dedication and hard work of staff at sixth-form colleges not just in Scarborough, but across the country, who enable students to reach their full potential?

Alison Bennett: I agree that sixth-form college teachers do a huge amount of good, supporting students from a vast variety of backgrounds, including disadvantaged backgrounds.

This evening, I was pleased to meet in Parliament my constituent Amelie Lockhart, a year 13 student at Varndean, and Fleur Hemmings, a philosophy teacher at Varndean. Amelie told me that the strikes are limiting the time left for year 13 students to finish their subject content, and she and her friends are worrying about hitting their grades for university. Sam, a BHASVIC student from Haywards Heath, said:

"I'm worried about learning all the content for my A-levels at this crucial point in my life but I support the teachers in this strike."

Similarly, a year 12 double maths student from BHASVIC told me that because they complete A-level maths in just one year, the strikes mean that he has already missed out on the teaching of several full topics of learning crucial to his exams in June. In addition, BTec students started exams last week just as three days of strikes took effect, and university applicants who need extra support—often students from more disadvantaged backgrounds or with special educational needs—have been impacted just before the end of January application deadline.

Lily from Haywards Heath, who studies at Collyer's, says:

"These strikes disrupted my learning during mocks week. I didn't have the proper class time to prepare for my exams. Of course I support the teachers. I think they should get the proper salary they deserve."

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing the debate. I spoke to her beforehand to mention an example and support her position. There have been similar strikes in Northern Ireland, and teachers' strikes are approaching. The main thing my constituents tell me is that students, who are already under enormous pressure during exam periods, must not be left struggling under undue duress and pressure. When it comes to sorting out these problems, does she agree that, although wage increases for teachers are important, the issues facing students must not be ignored?

Alison Bennett: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention and agree that the impact on students is at the centre of the debate.

Emma, a parent from Hurstpierpoint, has said to me that it is madness for the Government to think that they could agree a deal with one set of teachers and exclude another. Meanwhile, a BHASVIC parent told me that they support the teachers but are frustrated that their children, who were let down during covid by a Conservative Government, are now being let down by a Labour Government, too.

So it is that teachers such as Fleur decided to go on strike, with a heavy heart. They are mindful that students get just two short years at college to study and prepare for their futures and that every day counts. For our year 12 and year 13 students, this is just the latest round of disruption that their education has been subject to: they were in years 7 and 8 when the first covid lockdown was announced and did not get back into school for six months. That had a profound impact not just on their learning but on their social and emotional development, with soaring rates of mental ill health and school absenteeism still being widely reported five years later. Then, during 2022 and 2023, there were further rounds of strikes in those students' schools.

As Arianne from Haywards Heath, who is a BHASVIC student, said this week:

"The most frustrating thing is the loss of routine. The strikes have made it hard to integrate back into college after Christmas. We can't get as much support from teachers for coursework, which might affect our grades. It feels very disengaging. None the less, I still support the teacher strikes and understand that if change is going to happen you have got to do something disruptive."

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): On Friday, I was at Marple college, where a number of young learners talked to me about the really important elements of quality teaching and how they help, just as my hon. Friend laid out. She has mentioned a number of her constituents who have made exactly the same point.

I have also been contacted by Danny Pearson, the principal of Aquinas college, who knew that my hon. Friend had secured the debate. I want to share one sentence of his. He said:

"We really should be putting students and their education first and it seems a great shame that we cannot avert these strikes and get sixth form teachers back where they belong, in front of our students."

[Lisa Smart]

Does my hon. Friend agree with me and Danny that the Government should do more to get brilliant teachers back in front of their students, where they belong?

Alison Bennett: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I absolutely agree that more needs to be done, and with urgency.

Why would sixth-form teachers take this step and cause more disruption to their students? I think that these strikes have come about because of sheer frustration at an illogical pay offer that effectively creates a two-tier sixth-form system. In July, the Government accepted the recommendation of the School Teachers' Review Body to increase the pay of teachers in schools by 5.5%, and £1.2 billion of funding was provided for that pay award, but the Government excluded teachers at non-academised sixth-form colleges, yet they do exactly the same job as those in academised sixth-form colleges and at maintained schools.

So far, the Government have provided two explanations for that illogical decision. First, in response to my parliamentary question, they said:

"The government is not responsible for setting or making recommendations about teacher pay in further education...colleges, including sixth form colleges."

One college principal I have talked to described that explanation as

"inaccurate at best, deceptive at worst".

In fact, the Government have made a choice. They could have chosen to provide more funding to colleges to help fund pay awards, but they did not. There is precedent for making that choice: in 2023, the then Conservative Education Secretary chose to provide more money for all colleges through the 16 to 19 funding formula. This choice is costing some students valuable teaching time, while others—in some cases at schools just down the road—are having no such trouble.

The Government's second explanation is that they are facing a "very challenging fiscal context". They were able to find £1.2 billion for the initial pay award but said they could not provide the extra £19 million needed to end the strikes. That relatively small amount would ensure pay parity for teachers everywhere in the country and, in doing so, stop students from needlessly missing out on vital days of education. As the 2023 funding settlement proves, it is absolutely possible to extend support to all sixth-form colleges and there is no legal or technical reason to prevent it. It is a choice in the gift of the Government.

To add insult to injury, sixth-form colleges are already facing significant funding inequalities. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, Government spending on students in those colleges is 26% lower than it is for students in secondary schools, and unlike schools and academies they cannot reclaim VAT, costing them around £350,000 per year on average.

There are also the longer-term implications of the widening pay gap. The IFS has estimated that as a result of last year's 5.5% pay award for schoolteachers and the 2.5% increase for college teachers, the pay gap in this academic year will be the highest on record—£7,000, or 18%. My constituent Jo, a senior sixth-form college teacher and a mentor for early-career teachers, told me

that one of her mentees has already had to leave Brighton and return to Newcastle as he could not afford to live in the south-east, and another of her current mentees is finding it difficult to survive on his teaching salary. She said that the erosion of teachers' pay over the past decade, together with the high cost of living in this part of the country, means that Sussex is losing very good teachers. In her words, that is a direct threat to current and future students.

The Government must take urgent action to ensure that teachers in sixth-form colleges receive the 5.5% pay award, backdated from 1 September 2024. That is essential if we want to ensure that students' education is not further disrupted. As we have heard, there is a clear and compelling case for providing funding to sixth-form colleges. The Government must change course. They appear to have belatedly realised that they made the wrong choice and have recently offered a staggered pay rise, with the 5.5% pay award applying from 1 April. However, that would still leave a pay discrepancy of £2,000 for no logical reason, other than—I presume—not being seen to backtrack completely from their ridiculous initial decision.

The Government must prioritise the education of students from Sussex and across the country, and must ensure that sixth-form colleges can continue to recruit and retain excellent teaching staff. Varndean, BHASVIC and Collyer's are currently offering some of the very best opportunities within the state sector to our country's 16 to 18-year-olds, but that is at risk if the Labour Government do not urgently address the inequality they are exacerbating in the sector.

I close in the strongest terms, by urging the Minister and the Government to reconsider their approach; to find the small amount of money remaining to ensure that teachers are paid the same for the same job; and to finally put this cohort of students, whose education was most affected by covid disruption, at the centre of decisions made by Government that affect them.

10.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett) on securing a debate on this important subject. I will endeavour to respond to as many of the points as possible.

Since taking on the role of Minister for Skills, my noble Friend in the other place has met many of our amazing teachers, support staff and leaders in the further education sector, including our sixth-form college sector. I thank all those people for the excellent work that they do, day in and day out. Alongside schools, FE colleges and other FE providers, sixth-form colleges play a vital role in transforming the lives of our young people, breaking down their barriers to opportunity and ensuring they can progress into further training, higher education and higher-quality careers. This is central to our mission of delivering economic growth, ensuring and enabling success not just for individuals but for our communities, our companies and our country. Colleges, teachers, technicians, and everyone who supports students are important to us, and this Government will treat them with the value and respect they deserve.

The Government believe—as Labour Governments always do—that education is about opportunity, and that the role of government is to extend opportunity to

young people from every background and every corner of this country. The Government's commitment to the education of young people was plain to see in our Chancellor's Budget announcement of an additional £300 million for further education, to ensure young people are gaining the education and skills that they and this country need.

Our fantastic sixth-form colleges will benefit from that increase, and we announced on Friday that we are making approximately £15 million of that funding available to sixth-form colleges and general FE colleges for April to July 2025. This one-off grant will enable colleges to respond to current priorities and challenges, including workforce recruitment and retention. The remaining funding will be made available in 16-to-19 funding rates for the academic year 2025-26, with the aim of ensuring that all 16-to-19 providers are funded on an equitable basis from 2025 to 2026. This was in the context of a very challenging fiscal landscape, and it demonstrates the value we place on further education.

I do of course acknowledge the challenges that sixth-form colleges and their teachers face, and the concerns about the disparity with schoolteachers following the schoolteachers pay award in July. The schoolteachers award was made in line with the recommendations of the independent School Teachers Review Body. However, pay in the FE sector, including in sixth-form colleges, is a matter for colleges themselves, not the Government. Colleges are able to base pay on their specific needs and are not bound by the schoolteachers pay award or related terms and conditions.

As Members will know, FE colleges, including sixth-form colleges, were incorporated under the terms of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, which gave them autonomy over the pay and the contractual terms and conditions of their staff. On the six-day strike action that had taken place in this academic year, I know that both sixth-form college teachers and leaders are always concerned to ensure that the impact on young people is minimised as far as possible, and I acknowledge the information that the hon. Lady has shared about some of those students' experiences.

As I have said, I know that both sixth-form college teachers and leaders are always concerned about the impact on young people. Some of their arrangements include providing online learning where possible, and keeping libraries and learning centres open to allow for independent study. I know that both sixth-form college teachers and leaders will continue to consider and mitigate the impact of strikes on young people during the course of any industrial action. We encourage open and constructive dialogue by all parties in the best interests of staff and students. We all have the shared goal of ensuring that our young people gain the very best education during this critical transition period.

Our great FE teachers play a critical role in the lives of young people. We know that high-quality teaching generates high-quality outcomes for learners, and this is why we need more great FE teachers, including in critical subject areas. After a decade in which education was far from the heart of Government thinking, the new Labour Government are bringing about change at pace. It is for this reason that we are committed to recruiting 6,500 new expert teachers across our schools—both mainstream and specialist—and colleges over the course of this Parliament.

Our measures will include getting more teachers into skills shortage subjects, supporting areas that face recruitment challenges and tackling retention issues. We have begun to make good early progress towards this key pledge. We have already rolled out our targeted retention incentive to teachers in further education, including sixth-form colleges, to boost recruitment and retention. For the first time, this gives eligible early career FE teachers in key STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—and technical shortage subjects up to £6,000 after tax annually on top of their normal pay. In addition, the Taking Teaching Further programme makes it easier for providers to recruit and retain those with relevant industry knowledge by providing early career support to help their transition into teaching. We also continue to support recruitment and retention with teacher training bursaries worth up to £30,000, tax-free, in certain key subject areas.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): This is a huge problem in my constituency. Between Sparsholt agricultural college, which provides specialist training, as has just been mentioned, and Peter Symonds sixth-form college, which is one of the biggest sixth-form colleges in the country, a total of almost 9,000 students are affected by this pay disparity and the resulting dispute just in my constituency alone. Does the Minister agree that the Government need to start viewing education as an investment not just in our young people, but to grow the economy, not purely as a cost to be cut, which seems to have been the case over the last few years?

Janet Daby: I thank the hon. Member for mentioning those 9,000-plus students from his area. This Government are interested in and passionate about breaking down the barriers that prevent young people from progressing and, with one in eight young people not in training, education or employment, we recognise the need to give young people the skills and training that they need, and support into employment. That is one of the key focuses and missions of this Government, and we are totally committed to it.

The national further education teacher recruitment campaign is raising awareness and consideration of careers in FE. To find out more and plan next steps, it encourages people to visit the website Teach in FE, which received more than 450,000 visits in 2023-24. We are committed to ensuring that we recruit and retain more teachers across schools and colleges in our country. We are taking those steps to ensure that we attract and retain high-quality teachers across our schools and colleges, which forms part of our aim to create a clear, flexible high-quality skills system that supports people of all ages, breaking down barriers to opportunity and driving economic growth.

We have established Skills England to ensure that we have the highly trained workforce needed to deliver the national, regional and local skills needs of the next decade, aligned with the upcoming industrial strategy. Skills England will work closely with employers, unions, Departments, local organisations and other agencies. Skills England will ensure that the skills system is clear for employers and delivers the training that they need. It will play a key role in supporting the skilled workforce needed to deliver the Government's five missions: driving economic growth; breaking down barriers to opportunity; supporting our NHS; safer streets; and our clean energy

[Janet Daby]

transition. That links to our commitment to 1.5 million more homes, and seizes the opportunity of net zero to create hundreds of thousands of good jobs. Skills England will ensure that the skills system is clear for individuals, including young people and older adults, strengthening career pathways into jobs across the economy. The Government's dedication to skills reflects the utmost importance that we place on transforming lives and the economy.

I thank the hon. Member for Mid Sussex for securing this debate on such a vital matter, and I thank other Members for their contributions. I reiterate my thanks to the wonderful teachers and leaders who make such a difference to the prospects of our young people. This debate has given me the opportunity to talk about our plans for post-16 education and skills, which are essential for breaking down the barriers to opportunity and for the country's economic growth. The additional £300 million

of funding for FE, as well as the targeted retention incentive, teacher training bursaries, the taking teaching further programme and our teach in FE campaign, demonstrate the value we place on the FE workforce, including our excellent teachers and leaders in sixth-form colleges. I pay tribute to the transformative work that FE staff do day in, day out.

High-quality teaching is one of the biggest influences in positive learner outcomes, providing learners with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed. I am sure that we will continue to discuss skills and 16 to 18-year-old education in the coming months, because the Government recognise the importance of improving prospects for young people and how that links to our plans to drive economic growth. FE teachers are and will remain central to those plans.

Question put and agreed to.

10.24 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 13 January 2025

[DEREK TWIGG *in the Chair*]

Children's Social Media Accounts

4.30 pm

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 661407 relating to children's social media accounts.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Twigg.

It is a privilege to have the opportunity to open this important debate as a member of the Petitions Committee. I start by paying tribute to the petitioners and in particular the petition creator, Ellen Roome, who I had the honour of meeting as part of my preparations for this debate and who is in the Gallery today.

Ellen's son, Jools, died in April 2022. Since then, she has been a determined campaigner not just to get access herself to Jools' social media data to help understand the circumstances of his death, but also to secure a future in which other bereaved parents do not face the situation that she has. I welcome that Ellen's MP, the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson), is here, as is my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy), who has been working with Ellen on this issue. I look forward in particular to their contributions, which I know will provide further insight and will rightly ensure that Ellen's own words are on the parliamentary record.

Since Jools' death in 2022, the law and practice related to social media data has changed in several ways, most notably through the Online Safety Act 2023. The changes were secured in large part thanks to the efforts of the Bereaved Families for Online Safety group, other members of which are also here today; I pay tribute to their work. What I hope will become clear in this debate is that recent changes to the law, the implementation of those changes and the response of social media companies are not yet sufficient, and further change is needed to help bereaved parents such as Ellen. The petition attracted 126,000 signatures. That is a testament to Ellen's campaigning efforts and the public's concern about these issues.

Online services such as social media, streaming and messaging are now features of everyday life, including children's lives. There are undoubtedly positive aspects of age-appropriate online services—giving children opportunities to explore the world, connecting with others who share interests and extending peer support options—but as the level of public concern recognises, it is beyond doubt that there has been significant exposure of many children to online harms, and that the action in response to that has not yet been sufficient or fast enough to meet the challenges.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): Ellen Roome has gone through the unimaginable; I am absolutely amazed at her ability to continue fighting for answers for her son Jools. Does the hon. Member agree that social media companies are not in the wild west of the internet age any more and have become an integrated part of

our society with certain responsibilities? Does he also agree that one of those responsibilities is ensuring that children in Wokingham and across the UK are protected from harmful content?

Lewis Atkinson: I agree that social media companies rightly face regulation; I will talk a little more about that later.

There is, rightly, debate and campaigning in the media and elsewhere—we saw some of that over the weekend—about the level of regulation of online content that children may access online, whether that is illegal content or legal but harmful content. Although the regulation of content itself is not the focus of today's debate, as a concerned parent myself, I am impatient for online services to take proper responsibility for what our children see. Social media companies must not shy away from their responsibilities to protect children, either because of misguided free speech concerns or out of concern about their levels of profit.

It is important to note, as context for today's debate, that the law does not allow online services to collect or store the personal information of children under the age of 13. As a result, most popular services require users to be at least 13 years of age, but enforcement of that requirement has historically been lax. The age-assurance requirements in the Online Safety Act must be implemented without delay.

I know that hon. Members will want to touch on various elements of the approaches to social media regulation, but in parallel to the wider debate about content regulation, the petitioners are clear that there are specific issues about parental access that warrant a response in their own right, from both social media companies and the Government, so I want to focus my remarks, and I hope this debate, on those specific questions.

First, the petitioners call for parental access to social media when children are alive. I understand the instinct behind this call—the instinct to directly monitor what a child is doing online in order to protect them from the harms to which I have referred. However, in the course of preparing for the debate, I heard clearly from multiple perspectives, including children's charities such as the NSPCC, that broad, overarching parental rights to children's social media would not be appropriate. Of course, given that the minimum age of use should be 13, we are talking about teenagers. Children—teenagers—do have long-established rights to privacy, as set out by the UN convention on the rights of the child, and established UK law and practice in a range of areas reflects and recognises that.

Such rights are important not just as abstract concepts but because, as I have heard, older children sometimes need private online spaces to help them to explore the world—for example, a teenager understanding their own sexuality before they wish to share it with their parents. We also know that, sadly, in some horrible cases, parents are themselves perpetrators of abuse against their children. Establishing a blanket right to access children's online activity would remove an important safe route for children to seek support and alert others in such cases.

The petitioners themselves have reflected on such matters, and although they remain determined to support parents to keep their kids safe online, there is a recognition

[*Lewis Atkinson*]

that establishing an overarching parental right to access the data of living teenagers is unlikely to be the appropriate way forward. Instead, it appears to me that parental oversight of a child's social media use should rather be achieved through strengthening and significantly increasing the uptake of parental controls and other specifically designed arrangements that children and their parents agree to together, as part of the sign-up processes for online services. It is clearly the responsibility of online services to implement and expand such measures, and I hope for rapid progress in that area as a key part of online services' work to improve children's safety online in partnership with parents.

I now turn to the issue of bereaved parents' access to social media data, which is the specific issue for which Ellen has been campaigning, because she is still not able to access data about Jools' use of online services before his death. I cannot begin to imagine the anguish of losing a child and, even more so, not being given information that might help a parent to understand the circumstances of their child's death. We rightly talk about laws, protections and rights, but we do not talk enough as a society about the right—indeed, the need—to grieve a loss, especially one as painful as the loss of child.

In preparing for this debate, I spoke with SLOW, or Surviving the Loss of Your World—a charity that offers bereavement support for parents following the loss of a child. The charity emphasised to me the absolute necessity, as part of the grieving process, of establishing an understanding of what led to death. By being denied data about Jools' online activity before his death, Ellen has been denied the ability to grieve as she wishes. The petition recognises that it cannot be right that a grieving mother is forced to go through years of campaigning and investigation to try to get answers about her son's death. I urge everyone—especially those working in social media companies—to reflect on the evident injustice of the situation, and to commit to finding a way to do the right thing: to give Ellen the information and answers she needs.

The Online Safety Act 2023 made important provisions for Ofcom and coroners to access social media in relevant cases following a child's death, in turn helping bereaved families. It is welcome that the current Government's Data (Use and Access) Bill, which is making its way through Parliament, strengthens those powers and the requirements for data retention so that the risks of data loss in such cases are reduced. However, the provisions do not have retrospective mechanisms, and are therefore not sufficient for historical cases, such as Jools', where the coronial process has already concluded. As a result, Ellen is in the situation where she has to try and crowdfund a significant sum of money for legal action to get Jools' inquest re-run, so that the coroner can use the powers now available in law to access Jools' social media data. It cannot be right that this is necessary.

Some online services say that without a change in the law, they cannot legally release data to bereaved parents like Ellen, but what has struck me in preparation for the debate is that there is not a consensus on the current legal situation. The online safety and data protection expert, John Carr, told me that he did not believe that the general data protection regulations necessarily limited the release of children's usage data to bereaved parents.

Snap, the provider of Snapchat, told me that it already, on a case-by-case basis, discloses usage data to a parent who is the successor to a deceased child.

Other online services—including some of the most prominent social media services used by young people, such as TikTok—seem to take a different interpretation of the law. They state that data protection legislation prohibits them from releasing any data they hold that would give parents like Ellen the answers they deserve. I find this inconsistency of interpretation from online services at best troubling and at worst suspicious, given the historical behaviours of some social media companies that were involved in minimising—and indeed covering up—evidence of the impact of online harm. I believe it is incumbent on all online services to use their considerable resources to push the existing law as far as they can, and to find a way to release data to bereaved families.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): We owe it to our constituents that we work together, and leave no stone unturned to understand the trends and drivers that lead our children to take their own lives. Social media companies headquartered overseas have repeatedly demonstrated that they cannot be relied on to take reasonable action out of good will, so I invite the hon. Member to agree that it is up to Parliament to legislate accordingly.

Lewis Atkinson: I agree that legislative action has been necessary, as the Online Safety Act shows, and indeed, there are provisions on this in the current data Bill. The issue is that there is a lack of clarity; under the existing law, some social media companies seem to be finding a way of doing the right thing while others are not. I will come to the hon. Member's point when I ask a couple of questions of the Government.

I can assure the social media companies—in the event that they carefully do the right thing, on a case-by-case basis, and then face data protection questions from regulators in response—that they will find allies across Parliament in defending their actions.

I ask the Minister and the Government: what scope is there for stating clearly in law that, so long as due care is taken on a case-by-case basis, the release of data to bereaved parents is permitted? Could the data Bill be amended to include a clarification to remove, once and for all, the claim of some companies that they are prohibited from giving parents like Ellen the data and answers they deserve? Are there any other steps the Minister believes could be taken to right this injustice? I look forward to hearing the perspectives of colleagues and the Government's response to this important debate.

4.45 pm

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I thank the Petitions Committee for enabling this debate and the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) for opening it.

There is nothing any parent fears more than the loss of a child. Tragically, in 2022, Ellen Roome suffered this loss. Her world was shattered when she came home to find her son Jools not breathing. He had taken his own life aged just 14. While Ellen was dealing with the enormous pain of her loss, she also had questions about what had

happened in the days, weeks and months leading up to Jools' death. Jools was a happy boy. A video filmed just before his death shows him playing happily with friends. The absence of any hints that he might have been inclined to harm himself led Ellen's search to his social media accounts.

In her search for answers, Ellen found herself blocked by a legal system unable to tackle the complexities of social media and obstructive social media giants that placed process ahead of compassion. The police had no reason to suspect a crime, so did not see a reason to undertake a full investigation into Jools' social media. The inquest did not require a thorough analysis of Jools' online accounts. None of the social media companies would grant Ellen access to Jools' browsing data, citing regulations. A court order was needed to access his digital data, which required eye-watering legal fees.

Ellen sought nothing more than what amounts to access to her deceased child's personal effects. In years gone by, that would have required searching through a child's bedroom, perhaps looking at diaries, notes, letters, toy boxes, stickers or any other clues. The modern-day equivalent of such a search necessitates access to social media accounts, but because the law has not kept pace with the realities of modern life, that search has not been and cannot be completed. This is a cruel and inhumane process to impose on a grieving parent seeking nothing more than answers about what happened before their child took their own life. That is all Ellen wanted.

I ask all of us present, and anyone watching at home, to consider what we would want to happen if we found ourselves in Ellen's shoes, and go further to think what rights a parent would assume in those circumstances, as a matter of natural justice. There is, of course, a much wider debate about online harms, but Ellen is using her experiences and her campaign to bring about positive change in this debate. She is seeking answers in order that others do not have to in future.

The case of Jools and Ellen is not the first time that social media companies have come up short. The dynamic and fast-moving nature of the internet means that social media companies are able to act before legislators have a chance to catch up. This is a problem that has persisted for many years, but it is notable that they act only when pushed by brave campaigners like Ellen shining a light on what is happening.

As we have heard, the Online Safety Act takes us a step forward, and it does improve rights of access. The current legislation, however, means that bereaved parents like Ellen are still left to fight bureaucracy. In Ellen's case, she is seeking retrospective action too. The Government should look at how exactly they can rectify that urgently and in retrospective cases.

There is now an acknowledgment that giving parents the right to automatic access to living children's social media accounts may have unintended and undesirable consequences relating to child protection, but if the law and parents are to acknowledge that balance, social media companies must do their bit to keep children safe online from predators, inappropriate content and content that may cause children to harm themselves.

Sadly, in recent weeks and months we have seen social media companies make increasingly vociferous claims that the protection of free speech and freedom of expression online must come above all else. The examples

of Elon Musk's bizarre approach to X and Meta's decision to ditch moderation in favour of community notes are instructive of what is happening and what could happen next, and there has also been much discussion of the impact of the TikTok algorithm on children's mental health. Other platforms and examples will come up in the future. We have also seen democracies start to act to curtail the power of social media companies—the example of the Australian Government's approach is instructive, whether or not Members of this House agree with the detail.

I thank the hon. Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy) for her support for my constituent Ellen; I know it has been valuable to her over the past few weeks and months. I thank Ellen herself and pay tribute to her: she is the person whose petition brings us here today. The heartache and devastation she has endured is unimaginable for the rest of us, but Ellen has turned her grief into something that is positive and could be even more positive for this country and other parents. Having watched her campaign so tirelessly, and provided support where I could for the past few months, I am immensely proud of what she has achieved. We should all be thankful for what Ellen and other members of Bereaved Families for Online Safety are doing. They know what we in this Chamber, the Government, the legal system, police forces and social media companies know: the system is badly failing children and families.

Social media companies must now be placed on notice. They must protect children and respect families or face the consequences. They must protect children so that the Joolses of the present and the future do not meet a tragic and early end. They must respect the Ellens of the past, present and future so they can be confident that their children can be safe too.

4.53 pm

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): It is every parent's worst nightmare to lose a child—imagine losing them and not knowing why they are gone. Ellen Roome is Jools' mum. She deserves answers but, unbelievably, she is not allowed access to the data that might provide them, which is so wrong.

This petition is for Jools' law, which would allow parents to have access to their child's online data in specific circumstances. Jools Sweeney was hugely loved and is greatly missed by his family and community. In actuality, Jools' law would present a small amendment of no more than 100 words to the Online Safety Act 2023; the amendment and Jools' law would appear in section 101 of chapter 4, which is titled "Information powers and information notices".

The Act currently outlines the powers that a senior coroner has in relation to instructing Ofcom to issue a notice to online platforms to provide data in relation to the death of a child. Section 101 of the Act will be amended by clause 122 of the Data (Use and Access) Bill to strengthen the powers that Ofcom has to prevent the deletion of a child's data when a notice has been given and issued to the regulated platforms that the child has died.

The progress made in this policy area is testament to the parents of children who are no longer with us and to their incredible strength and work. I thank those present and those watching for everything they have done to

[Lola McEvoy]

protect our children. We need to build on this work to allow parents access to data without the need for a second inquest.

A further amendment would allow for Ofcom to be notified as a routine course of action in the event of future tragedies of child suicide or unexplained deaths. That would alleviate the risk of vital answers to parents' inevitable questions being deleted, and mitigate the reality of it being solely the responsibility of the parents to request the data in those painful early days of grief. The authorities should initiate a data notice in the event of a child's death to protect those answers from being lost. The amendment, while small in word count, would be transformational to the rights and experiences of bereaved families. We in this place would be hard pressed to find a parent, or indeed anyone touched by the darkness of a child's death, who would not support the measures.

Ellen Roome is Jools' mum. She and I have bonded over our shared belief that there can be a future where our children are safe online, and that there must be a future where every child, in every corner of our great country, is protected from online harm. We are bonded by the fact that we will continue to shout loud until that becomes a reality. Ellen has asked me to read her statement about her work to get to this point—her story. That is a great privilege, and I will read her statement in its entirety without taking interventions, as a mark of respect for her incredible work in this area and for all those she speaks for who have experienced such intolerable pain. The work of the Bereaved Families for Online Safety group has already changed the law, and for that they should be immensely proud.

Before I read Ellen's statement, I must pay tribute to her. We all hope that if we were put in Ellen's position or faced with her reality, we would stand up and fight for change. The hard truth is that most people cannot, but Ellen Roome is not most people: she is exceptional. Her grit, tenacity and determination to turn her pain into purpose and progress, and to fight for answers for her family, for all those who knew and loved Jools and for those who have found themselves in the same terrible situation, is truly remarkable. More than that, it is Ellen's warmth, openness and grace that I have been moved by.

These are her own words:

"It only takes one person to make a stand for morality and justice; in this case, that's me. However, I'm supported by thousands and thousands of people across the world who think it is morally wrong that I am not entitled to see my child's social media data, which might provide answers as to why my 14-year-old son chose to end his own life.

When I launched the petition, I asked that 'Parents should have the right to full access to their child's social media accounts either whilst they are still alive (to protect them) or if they die, as in my case'. It hadn't crossed my mind that the parents might be the perpetrators. I now understand this could be the case and hope the Online Safety Bill and Ofcom can protect live children online. However, in my case and that of other parents, when the child has died, who are we protecting? The predators on these platforms? Social Media companies? Surely, I should have the right to look for answers to his cause of death. Jools' young friends struggle to understand why he is no longer here. The ripple effect of his death is felt not only by us as his parents, but also Jools'

friends, teachers, and everyone in his life was so shocked as to why he ended his life – we deserve possible answers or at least to try for answers.

I am his parent, and he is a minor. As a child, he consented to terms and conditions that permitted social media companies to control his online data. I'm unaware of any other legal context in which a 13-year-old can authorise a legal document, such as terms and conditions.

I have always said that I do not know if it was social media that caused my son to end his own life; however, as a parent, I feel I should morally and humanely have the right to that data to give me possible answers as there was nothing offline which seemed to be an issue to Jools. He was not bullied; he was doing well at school and had many friends. There didn't appear to be body issues, and whilst he didn't like his floppy hair or chin, we are unaware of anything else that could be of concern. Yes, he had a cheeky side to him, as do a lot of teenagers, but he was a great kid who loved his parents, and his parents loved him VERY MUCH. I fight now for the right to possible answers as to why my son is no longer alive. I have always thought this to be an online challenge gone wrong.

Many MPs feel that the data bill will solve this issue. It won't help me or other parents who are in the same awful boat as me. The data bill will allow a coroner the right to access this data in future deaths of children, BUT only if the coroner or the police request it. How do we stop future cases where neither the police nor the coroner asked to see this information? This is what happened in Jools' case.

As a bereaved parent, I was barely breathing myself after the death of Jools, and I was in no fit state to ask or even think of asking the police and or coroner for this information. This could easily happen again with the new data bill. Also, retrospectively, we cannot obtain this information without applying to the High Court for a second inquest. My lawyer has quoted that it will cost me up to £86,000 to hopefully succeed in the high court, but that seems so wrong to have to find this level of legal fees, which is beyond the reach of almost all bereaved parents, to start looking into missing online activity and what was going on. Also, what a waste of legal professionals and staff involved with a new inquest. I'm just asking for data which I feel should be available to me as his parent. However, I'm not allowed to see it, which is wrong.

I hope this will be a good debate. But please remember that as a member of the Bereaved Families for Online Safety group, I represent many other families in the same awful situation and want to try for answers as to why their precious children are no longer alive.

If this had been your child, you would want answers too. I don't want any other family to be in this hideous position, which will forever affect us all: our family, Jools' friends, his teachers, everyone in Jools' life, and their families, forever."

Those are Ellen's words. Ellen's campaign for justice is rare. As a new MP, I may be forgiven for my perceived naivety, but to me Ellen's campaign poses a binary choice for us—there is no grey area—so I ask that the Minister does everything in her power to help those seeking answers now, whose cases may not be supported through new measures. It is simply wrong that information that may offer clarity and peace to parents who face a new reality without their child is denied them. It is simply wrong that parents who are living in that unenviable reality now face the colossal emotional and financial burden of a second inquest to discover whether the information exists at all. Ellen Roome is Jools' mum, a campaigner, a leader and a mother, and Ellen Roome is right.

5.2 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Twigg.

I join colleagues in thanking the petitioners, and Ellen Roome in particular, for initiating the petition and enabling this Westminster Hall debate. We were all deeply affected by hearing the statement that was just read out. Ellen, you have the sympathies of everybody here on the loss of Jools aged just 14. We think also of other bereaved families and other campaigners—in the last few days we have been reminded of Ian Russell and the work he has done since the tragic death of Molly—and all those who take the most unimaginably awful situation for a parent and a family and use it to try to make something better for others for the future.

The Government's response to the petition notes not only that, under the Online Safety Act, platforms have to set out their policy for dealing with such tragic situations, but that the Act

"introduces measures to strengthen coroners' ability to obtain information"

from platforms via Ofcom, thereby providing a route for parents. We will have to see how that works in practice and how timely it is. What we must not do is put a new, onerous layer on top of parents at the most difficult time imaginable, as they are grieving.

As has been mentioned, there is also the question of historic cases. There will be future historic cases, because not in every case will the inquest have covered this question. I hope the Minister will be able to say a word about whether the data Bill is the opportunity to put it beyond doubt that, ultimately, the parent has an absolute right, with the right safeguards and verifications, to see the information related to their child.

Let me turn from the most tragic of cases to all families and all children. I start with the most important point, which is that trust, support and love within families are the most effective things. Most of the time it is irrelevant what the law is because, within families, we set our own rules. Generally, it is clear that even if our rules are, at times, a pain for our children, they are well-intentioned. We must also note that not quite all families are loving families. Some parents are abusive, and children must always have ways confidentially to seek help from child protection services, the police, the health service and bona fide charities. That applies at any age.

It is also true that everyone needs a degree of privacy, but there have always been different degrees of privacy, and how private something is should be proportionate to the level of risk involved. In discussing accessing online services, we are talking about things that can have very serious consequences. We want and need to be able to protect our children from harm—from bullying, from unwanted contact, including from adults, and from being drawn to dangerous interests, which can become dangerous obsessions. We also have a responsibility, and we should be held responsible, for them not perpetrating harms on others. Although we trust our children, we know that children do sometimes get into trouble and can come under pressure, and in some cases severe coercion, from others. Of course, they potentially have ready access to material of all sorts that is much more harmful than we had as children. They can go deeper and deeper down rabbit holes.

Parents are not the only ones who can help children, but they have a unique position in children's lives and are uniquely placed to help and support them. That is

why I agree in principle with the petitioner that parents should have a right to see what their child is subjected to or is doing for as long as they are a child and we, as the parents, are responsible for them—and that means at least until age 16. There is a separate debate to be had about the extent of that, and what the threshold and process should be. I understand entirely what the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) was saying. I do not think anybody is proposing constant, ongoing monitoring, but there are situations that a child could find themselves in that I believe warrant the availability of that access.

There is also a problem, or a hurdle, with the principle: we can only request access to something that we know exists. It is common for children to have multiple social media accounts on a single platform. They probably have different names these days, but people used to call their fake and real accounts finsta and rinsta. The account their mum sees is not necessarily the real one—ironically, the one that was called "fake" was the one where their real lives were actually happening. Of course, they could also be on lots of other platforms that parents and others do not necessarily know about.

I agree with the hon. Member for Sunderland Central, who opened the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee, that it is of paramount importance that we are able to put some guardrails around what children can access. That is one of the reasons we have parental controls. How those controls work, and the limits of them, are what I want to talk about this afternoon.

I will read out a short note from Microsoft, which is not a company that people normally worry about—it is a very responsible operator—to a constituent ahead of their child's 13th birthday. It says:

"Congratulations on Fred's birthday. At this age, certain laws allow them to have more control and choices over their own account settings. This means that they'll be able to change a number of family safety settings, even if you already have them set up. Fred will also need to allow you to continue receiving data about their activities to guide their digital journey. They can turn off your ability to see their activity on Windows, Xbox, and Android devices. They can turn off your ability to see their devices and check on updates...safety settings like firewall and antivirus...They can stop sharing their location through their mobile phone."

That was for a child approaching their 13th birthday, which leads me to question what "certain laws" are being cited. I can only assume it is the Data Protection Act 2018, which sets out that

"a child aged 13 years or older"

can

"consent to his or her personal data being processed by providers of information society services."

The genesis of that was European law, and Parliament was debating and voting on it in parallel with, but before actually completing, exit from the European Union. The age 13 is not universal. EU law specified a range between 13 and 16, and multiple countries did select 13, but not all. France set the age at 15, with some limited non-contractual consents for data processing allowed between 13 and 15. Germany and the Netherlands set the age at 16. There is that question of what is the appropriate age, but the other big question is what that age actually means.

The 2018 Act was passed before we considered the Online Safety Bill, which became the Online Safety Act 2023, but we were already concerned in this House

[*Damian Hinds*]

about online safety, and I am fairly sure that it was not Parliament's intent to reduce parental oversight. In particular, I do not think saying that a service can have a child sign up to it at 13 is the same as saying that the parent cannot stop them. Still less, it is not the same as saying that the parent should not be able to know what their child is signed up to.

In setting out why the age was set at 13, the explanatory notes to the 2018 Act say, quite rightly, that that is in line with the minimum age that popular services such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram set, but they go on to say, slightly unrelatedly:

"This means children aged 13 and above would not need to seek consent from a guardian when accessing, for example...services which provide educational websites and research resources to complete their homework."

I think that sentence might have a lot to answer for. It sounds very sensible—we would not want children having to get over hurdles to finish their homework—but if we think about it, it is not necessary to sign up to research something on the internet for homework anyway, and educational websites are generally exempt from consent requirements. But the big question is, what else might it allow—or, crucially, what else might it be interpreted to allow?

I repeat that I do not believe that it was Parliament's intent in effect to disable parental safety controls for 13, 14 and 15-year-olds. There is a whole other question about those safety controls themselves and how they work, and how difficult it can be for parents—and even all of us, who tend to think we are quite good at this sort of thing—to keep on top of them, particularly if they have multiple children, different operating systems and multiple platforms. There really should be a single industry standard entry system that can cover all of screen time and basic, entry-level approvals with a default "safety on" version of the different platforms.

We talk about age thresholds and age limits; there is a whole other set of questions about how those apply and how we make age assurance or age verification work properly. Those are both debates for another day. Today, I simply ask the Minister: is it the Government's understanding of the existing legislation that children under 16 should be able to switch off parental controls? If not, what could be done to clarify the situation? Is a change needed in primary legislation?

5.13 pm

Tom Collins (Worcester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I thank all those who signed the petition for raising this issue. My heart goes out to Jools' family, and I thank them for their work to bring about change so that this does not happen to other people in the future.

I was recently joined by local leaders at an event in Worcester's fantastic local library to hear the views of young people in the Worcestershire Youth Cabinet. They presented their manifesto for young people, and I was struck by their insights and passion, and in particular by their deep concerns about the impact of the online world on their mental health. I share their concern that online harms have run away from us. We live in a world where people young and old are exposed to harmful

content and interfaces. I would like to see us move at pace to regulate not only extreme harms online, but persistent low-level harms that are eroding young people's mental health.

Having recently met Ofcom, I am concerned that there is much more to do to regulate harmful online media. Although I welcome us taking some first steps in this area, we are far behind where we need to be. If I were to liken our regulation of online harms to the regulation of drugs, we would be in a situation where a local newsagent would be required to assess the risk of supplying class A drugs, while alcohol, cigarettes and over-the-counter medicines remained an unregulated free-for-all. These are historical shortcomings due to previous Governments, but none the less we have much work to do to address the risks of online bullying, harassment and addiction.

In my constituency, I have heard at first hand the stories of men struggling with addiction to pornography and the damaging effects that has had on their relationships and personal wellbeing. We need to be open eyed about the impact of the new online world on adults and young people alike, and it is the duty of Government to empower people to stay safe.

Young people in Worcester told me that although they want online sources to be regulated, and to be equipped themselves for that world, what they want most is for their parents to be empowered to advise, guide and journey with them through the digital world. I agree that most parents are currently very poorly supported, and I welcome the enthusiasm I sense from Labour leaders for family hubs, which offer a community-led and empowering vehicle for that work. Does the Minister agree that we should equip parents and carers to navigate these hazards with their children, so that instead of feeling isolated, anxious and alone, young people feel supported, understood and empowered?

5.16 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I am very grateful to be able to speak in this debate, which was prompted by Ellen Roome's petition, although I am extremely sorry that any of us needs to be here at all. I pay tribute to Ellen and all the other families in the Bereaved Families for Online Safety network for their tireless campaigning.

A week before Christmas, I sat in a Committee Room with Ellen and senior representatives from all the major tech firms, including Meta, TikTok, YouTube and Snap. One conversation that morning will stay with me for a very long time—a conversation that I can describe only as harrowing, shocking and deeply depressing. Sitting alongside two other heartbroken parents who have also lost their children because of online harms, Ellen confronted the representatives of TikTok and Instagram, pleading with them to release information that could give her some peace of mind following the death of her beloved son, Jools. There can be nothing worse for a parent than losing a child, but to lose a child and not understand how or why must compound that agony.

Ellen does not know why Jools died. Unlike many other children and young people, he was not being bullied online and did not seem to have any mental health issues. All Ellen wants is to find out what her son was looking at online before he died; it might shed some

light on this tragedy that has clearly caused immeasurable grief. It was infuriating to listen to the tech firms' pathetic excuses that morning about why they could not or would not release the data that Ellen is asking for.

There was—there is—no good reason not to release that data. Jools is no longer with us, so claiming data protection seems frankly pointless. TikTok said that it would be fined for releasing the data, but my question is: by whom? Who is going to press charges against a global tech company for supporting the request of a bereaved mother? Who in their right mind would think that a court case on that point would help anyone?

As we have heard from the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson), some social companies have behaved differently in such cases. It is quite clear, however, why some will not agree to release that data: it is a pathetic attempt to avoid the potential bad publicity that will follow if it becomes clear that Jools' short life ended after taking part in a social media challenge, which is one possibility. It is about protecting the reputation of those social media companies. It is about the accountants who fear the lawsuits. In short, I suggest it is about money. The absence of humanity, care and compassion in that room before Christmas was palpable and I applaud Ellen for having the courage to come back here today.

I can see no reason why tech companies cannot immediately release the data that these devastated parents are asking for. I fully support Ellen and all the other parents in their attempts to get Jools' law on the statute books. In the meantime, I plead with Instagram and TikTok to not wait for a legal challenge, but just release the data: find your inner human and do something decent; imagine if it were your child.

Under UK law we have clear, legal processes for handling physical estates after death. It is high time that we establish clear protocols for the digital estates that are left behind, particularly the digital estates left by young people. The law must catch up with the world we are living in. Current provisions, such as Facebook's legacy contact feature, are not sufficient, because they rely on a child making a decision while they are still alive, often without fully understanding the implications, as has been mentioned. It is also quite possible that, if children were asked whether their parents could have full access to all of their digital online life in the event of their death, they would say no. Without formal, legal access arrangements, parents are left with no way of viewing their children's account.

Lola McEvoy: I was reading up on that issue in preparation for this debate and I came across some amendments to the Data (Use and Access) Bill that would require those huge providers and tech companies to have a complaints procedure, where parents could appeal to their better nature for the release of the data, but if they were refused it, there would be a proper complaints procedure. Does the hon. Lady think that goes far enough?

Caroline Voaden: No, I do not believe that goes far enough. There should be a legal right to access that data without having to go through any complaints process, particularly at a time when one is struggling with the worst bereavement imaginable.

The petition seeks to address that gap in law and ensure that, in the tragic event of a child's death, parents have the right to access their child's account to gain closure, to preserve memories and to ensure that harmful content is removed. I support the addition of Jools' law into the Online Safety Act, and I urge the Government to do whatever they can to apply it retrospectively for those who have campaigned on this issue.

What Ellen's family have been through is the absolute worst imaginable, but tens of thousands of families up and down the country are struggling with the impact of social media on their children and teenagers. Those children are addicted to their screens because of the wicked algorithms that lure them in; cowed by bullies who can intimidate them in their own bedrooms late at night; struggling with their body image because they do not look like the influencers they watch; depressed because their lives do not resemble the doctored, airbrushed Instagram image of perfection; and brainwashed by influencers who spew toxic messages through their pages.

The damaging impact of social media on our children is vast. Medical professionals from all disciplines tell us regularly of the harms children are experiencing from hour after hour spent glued to a screen. Their physical health is damaged, their mental health even more so, and even their ability to communicate and socialise with other humans is changing.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is about not only mental health harm, but inattention? I speak to many headteachers in my constituency who tell me that children are unable to concentrate any more because of hours spent on their screen. Would she agree that the Government study announced in November that seeks to explore that issue further should be published soon, because every day and every year we leave it, more children are at risk of harm?

Caroline Voaden: I could not agree more. What is becoming obvious is the impact of children being on their phones late at night, which affects their sleep—even that has a knock-on effect on how well they can operate.

Parents across my South Devon constituency are desperate to protect their children, but they are overwhelmed by the digital world and the power it has over young people. They need legislation to empower and support them. The NSPCC reports that over 60% of young people have encountered online bullying. That is a staggering number, highlighting the need for more robust protections from us for children in the digital space.

It is clear that we need more robust protection, and it is incumbent on us as lawmakers to protect children as we do from other harms such as tobacco and alcohol. It may be right that parents should not have access to their teenager's social media because of privacy reasons and to protect children's ability to seek support online, but that makes it even more important and urgent that social media companies should be required and obliged to take responsibility for watertight age verification, and that we should look seriously at raising the age of access to some social media platforms to 16.

I urge the Government to work with social media companies and other stakeholders to create a clear and respectful framework that allows parents access to their child's social media accounts after a death with no

[Caroline Voaden]

questions asked. This is not about data protection; this is about ensuring that families can concentrate on grieving and healing rather than going into battle against the world's tech giants.

It is abominable that any bereaved parent should have to do what Ellen and other campaigners are doing. I urge the Minister to legislate so that that does not happen again. I commend the Petitions Committee for bringing this debate to the House and the hon. Member for Sunderland Central for introducing it.

5.26 pm

Jess Asato (Lowestoft) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I pay tribute to Ellen Roome's steadfast campaign in the most awful, unimaginable circumstances, and to the campaigns of all the other bereaved parents who seek change so that no other parent has to suffer like they are.

As citizens, parents and legislators, we are rightfully worried about what our children consume online. The recent Channel 4 programme "Swiped" demonstrated the addiction our children have, the concerns parents have about the time they spend online, and the harms that children continue to face.

Before they are able to properly comprehend it, our children are sucked into the online world by algorithms that are designed to get them hooked and, as if it were a drug, they keep coming back for more. In this world, they are taught to look up to influencers with unhealthy opinions, unrealistic beauty standards and conspicuous wealth beyond their dreams. They are told that they are not good enough, they may be cyber-bullied by their peers for not being good enough, they have trouble sleeping and their attention span withers. We also know that short-sightedness is becoming more prevalent. Our children's work suffers and they find it increasingly difficult to read and learn.

Our children see pornography online before they receive high-quality sex and relationships education in school. They are shown adverts for apps that can use AI to nudyfy their peers and spread such images to their friends and around school. They are criminalised for doing that, but the tools they use remain legal and readily accessible. They get trapped in the whirlpool of online pornography and dragged into increasingly extreme and violent content. They become desensitised and their perceptions and expectations of sex and healthy relationships are warped. Online behaviours quickly become offline behaviours, such as self-harm, dangerous viral challenges and peer-on-peer sexual abuse, which do huge harm to mental health, so that one in five children now has a diagnosable mental health disorder.

A generation of children chronically online and harmed by it bear the brunt of a technology that was never designed with children's development in focus and that acts with no regard for the consequences of the harm it causes. When questioning tech companies recently, none of them could confirm that they develop products widely consumed by children with input from child development experts. I do not understand why we expect stringent standards in all other aspects of our children's lives—their toys, cots and bikes, and our cars—and yet not on the impact of social media products.

We cannot stand idly by in the name of freedom, because there is no freedom in addiction or in being harmed. We cannot let our children's lives be dominated by the dangerous online world. Whether it is depression or misogyny, eating disorders or myopia, we are failing children by continuing to subject them, and those they interact with, to the impacts of a childhood spent online. We need to reclaim childhood for the real world.

I recognise the important role of internet access in providing spaces for children to access support, but I wonder how we weigh up the harms caused through access to social media, which support services, mostly in the voluntary and community sector and our public services, need to mop up afterwards. We must look more at whether we could provide that access more safely in school settings or through youth services. I am very aware of the huge impact of abusive parents and carers, but it might be time for us to start asking whether we are using that as an excuse, rather than thinking about how we ensure our children can get the access they may need to get safe without also succumbing to the dangers of the online world.

We fundamentally need to change the role the internet plays in growing up, and that must be a societal shift, given the pressure children and young people feel to be online. That is why I back Ellen Roome's call for parental oversight. Parents deserve to have all the tools available to them to help them to protect their children, and that is why I am proud to be one of the co-sponsors of the safer phones Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister).

Much of the focus is on parental control, but as the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) has eloquently outlined, there is potentially no control from the age of 13. Even with controls, who sets what is the right developmental level for access to some apps and social media when there is no child development expert involved? App stores, for example, determine age restrictions themselves. In a number of instances, developers have set an age restriction of 18 for an app, but app stores have lowered that to 17 or 16. There is access but no scrutiny. Unlike for films or other things that our children consume, we have no way of understanding whether there has been independent, child-led expert oversight.

We need to raise the age of internet adulthood and ensure that, this summer, Ofcom properly implements age verification for pornographic content as part of the Online Safety Act 2023. We need to remain open to the need for a new online safety Bill to fill the gaps left in the legislation, as has been argued for recently by Ian Russell, Molly Russell's father. I also support the calls in this debate for bereaved parents to be given retrospective access to their children's social media accounts. With children's safety and the future of our society on the line, the time for action is now.

5.33 pm

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) for introducing this important debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. He made some powerful points in his speech, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to them. I also associate myself with the remarks made by my hon. Friend the

Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy), who spoke so eloquently, and my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson).

It is only right to start by paying tribute to Ellen and Bereaved Families for Online Safety, who are in the Public Gallery. They have raised this petition following the heartbreaking loss of Ellen's son, Jools. It is unbelievably courageous to turn away from the abyss of pain and grief, and to turn that into a campaign for good. It is, frankly, inspirational to many Members in this House and I thank the 1,711 Gloucester constituents who signed the petition.

As a relatively new parent, I now know what it is like to really worry about a child. People say that no one really knows what it is like to be a parent before their child is born. I laughed that off and thought, "Of course you can know," but, truly, no one does. The moment a parent meets their child for the first time, their world changes. I realised that I would literally walk through walls for my child. Thankfully, my child is only one. He does not yet have any social media channels that I am aware of. If that could continue for as long as possible, I would be grateful.

I know that parents are increasingly worried about their children's use of social media across the country and in my constituency of Gloucester. According to the Children's Commissioner, two thirds of parents are concerned about the content that their children can access online, and the impact that it is having on their children's mental health. Those concerns are felt by not only parents but children themselves. Research shows that nearly three quarters of teenagers have encountered potential harms online and three in five secondary-school age children have been contacted online in ways that have made them feel uncomfortable. As social media becomes increasingly embedded in our children's lives, it is clear that urgent action is needed. While the Online Safety Act 2023 was a long-awaited start to protecting children online, we must go further and I was pleased to hear my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology say that he is "open-minded" about introducing new legislation. I encourage him to consider introducing Jools' law.

My remarks will not particularly focus on online content, although my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) outlined some of the dangerous and horrific online content to which children and young people are exposed. Members of this House do not need to be reminded of the horrific content available online. Not long after being elected, I found that pictures of myself and my baby had been posted with a threatening message, anonymously, as part of an online "spotted" page. Members of this House develop a relatively thick skin in this job but imagine the impact of that on a teenager. I think back to my teenage days, and whether I was mentally equipped to be able to deal with cases of bullying. I am just about young enough to remember when Facebook came in—I was a teenager when Facebook started—and back then it was a very different place. Nowadays, we see, frankly, a cesspit of online content and I do not think that I would have had the mental capacity, during my teenage years, to deal with that level of abuse.

Cameron Thomas: The hon. Member, my constituency neighbour, makes an interesting point. My school years are long behind me and we sometimes look back at our

youth with rose-tinted glasses, but being at school can feel like being in a warzone—there is so much pressure. If someone is being consistently bullied, I can barely imagine what it must be like for them to try to escape that at home and then have a device in front of them with such material coming in, even at night. Does the hon. Member agree?

Alex McIntyre: The hon. Member is entirely correct that, in the days before social media, bullying was confined behind the school gates and in most cases, though sadly not all, the home was a place of safety and a haven in which a teenager could recover and steel themselves for the next day. That safety has been removed by social media and people are able to get someone, wherever they are.

As a teenager, I grew up with social media as it was first coming out—with Bebo, which I do not think exists anymore, and MSN Messenger. My parents had no oversight over what I was accessing or who I was talking to. Frankly, it was dangerous. That is not to question my parents' parenting skills; they are of an age where they are still learning how to use Facebook in 2025. However, we need to do more to protect teenagers at such a vulnerable age when they are learning about themselves and about how to build the mental resilience to deal with some of the stuff that some Members of this House experience on a regular basis.

Although we could have another debate on online content, we all know why we are speaking about the petition today. It concerns me that grieving parents cannot access information that may relate to the death of their children. We know that there has been a worrying rise in dangerous pranks and trends that go around on social media and in people using social media to groom and target young people, and that dangerous information is going viral—information that may have played a role in tragic and heartbreaking deaths up and down the country. Giving grieving parents the right to find answers for themselves must be within our power as a Government. I encourage the Minister to do what we can to support parents and families in this absolutely heartbreaking position.

5.41 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I would like to start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson). I am sure all my constituents in Edinburgh South West who signed the petition will be grateful for the time he invested in crafting his introductory speech. Like others, I pay tribute to Ellen Roome. She has shown herself to be a fantastic campaigner and I am sure her family is proud of her. However, the situation she finds herself in is absolutely shameful. The hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) is right to question the motives of the social media companies and to ask who would oppose them doing the right thing. Hopefully we will hear from them sooner rather than later on this issue. However, we have to accept that the framework within which these companies are operating was set by either action or inaction within this building, so we have a duty to fix it.

My children are all adults now, at least in theory—I hope they are not listening. However, when they were younger, it was always difficult to get the balance right

[Dr Scott Arthur]

between respecting their privacy and ensuring that they were safe in all aspects of life, but particularly online. We have to accept that the internet is a dangerous place. All of us are concerned about material online relating to eating disorders, self-harm and even suicide and, we should remind ourselves, have a duty to do more about it.

The hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) is not in his place today, but before Christmas he had an Adjournment debate on the role of internet service providers in blocking the most harmful content, which had been linked to the deaths of vulnerable young people. I went along to that debate just to learn more about the subject, but was utterly ashamed and frustrated at what is happening. There are companies that seem to be looking for reasons not to do the right thing rather than find a way to support vulnerable people across our country.

I hope the Minister can support as much as possible what Ellen Roome and her campaign are asking for, but we all, including the Minister, have to go beyond that. It is not just about the law: it is about creating a culture online for our young people where service providers and social media companies feel that they have a social responsibility to support the most vulnerable people in our society and do all they can to support them.

5.44 pm

Joani Reid (East Kilbride and Strathaven) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I pay tribute to Ellen Roome in the most genuine and heartfelt way for what she has achieved and what she does. The pain she has been through is utterly unimaginable. What we can do today, as I hope the Minister's response will, is make her bravery worth while.

I will focus my brief remarks on the Online Safety Act 2023, because so many of our hopes as parents, campaigners and elected representatives were pinned on that legislation. It is a step forward, but only a first step. I believe that more should be done. The Act was the product of a weak Conservative Government, with many Ministers and Back Benchers who shared the then Opposition's conviction that strong regulation of social media companies was essential but were being held to ransom by extreme libertarians who had dressed up their ability to monetise hatred and extreme content as a free speech issue. Government Ministers gave in to an alliance of social media companies that were not willing to dilute profits to spend on effective moderation and that had a financial and political interest in driving engagement with extreme content. That was a deplorable outcome, as many hon. Members said at the time.

Plainly, as a first task, the new Government must make that legislation work as best they can. I understand why my right hon. and hon. Friends are pressing on with implementing it as best as they can. However, my request to them is to heed the petition and recognise that what was good enough for the then Government under those circumstances cannot be good enough for this new Government in the medium and long term. It is certainly not good enough for our children.

The immediate concern for me, for the people I speak to at the school gates and for many of my hon. Friends is that the proposed regulatory regime will let some of the most dangerous and extreme websites escape the

proper regulation that the vast majority of people in this country expect them to receive. It cannot be right that we allow some sites to escape accountability for their failure to remove certain promotional material speedily simply because they are small. Of course they are small—such content is so vile that the chances of the promoters getting bigger audiences will always be limited—but the need for the firmest regulation in these cases is driven by content, not by size.

Patrick Hurley (Southport) (Lab): The failure of Ofcom to regulate the small but risky platforms seems to mean that a site such as LinkedIn is being regulated to a greater extent than platforms such as Telegram or Discord, which are overrun with far-right activism, self-harm, misinformation, homophobia and antisemitic content. Does my hon. Friend agree that that needs to be rectified and that Ofcom needs to raise its game?

Joani Reid: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I believe that more needs to be done. I do not believe that the Government have ruled that out: they are collecting evidence, so I believe that in future iterations of the code, if that argument is accepted by Ofcom, they will make the appropriate changes. It is up to us to continue to submit the evidence and to call for those changes to be made.

The main point in the debate is about the balance between regulation and innovation and about where we draw the line between the obligations of site users and those of content providers, so that we do not discourage new services and investment. However, I believe that that is not the issue that the petition we are debating addresses. Hatred and the data to which we are calling for access are not drivers of economic growth. Nor is the inclusion of high-harm sites in category 1 a barrier to investment plans for the frontline market leaders. This is about doing the right thing. I hope that all the voices will be heard today.

5.49 pm

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg, and to debate such a powerful and moving topic.

I want to start, as more or less everyone in this room has done, by paying tribute to Ellen for her tireless campaigning work. I cannot come close to comprehending the pain that the death of Jools must have caused you, even before it was exacerbated and extended by the lack of closure when social media companies refused to give you access to data that could help to explain what happened to him and when collectively, as a society, we showed ourselves impotent to compel them to do so. Your ability to turn that pain and that love into such a powerful petition and call for action, which motivated so many parents in my Hitchin constituency to sign up to it too, is a true inspiration to so many of us in the room. Just as we are inspired by you, we are inspired by the many families here with you today as part of the Bereaved Families for Online Safety support group, which has been doing so much important campaign work on the issue.

It is pretty clear to all of us who have spoken today that for far too long we have tolerated a belief that online harm is too tricky and too practically infeasible to regulate in the same way that we would regulate every other form of harm to which a young person could

be exposed, often in contexts in which as legislators we have historically been more comfortable getting involved. We cannot tolerate that state of affairs any longer. Although there have been some steps forward, which are to be welcomed and which I will touch on shortly, the petition highlights several areas in which it is clear that we need to consider going further to ensure that we are all living up to our duty to do everything we can to protect young people right across society.

Both as a teacher and as a children's social lead, I got to see at first hand some of the very real ways in which young people can be exposed to harm by our failure to act on the issue of social media and online harm over the past decade. As an MP now, I am always struck by the fact that, heartbreakingly, whenever I do an assembly, even in a lower school or a primary school, almost without fail there will be one young person, and often several, who will raise their hand and talk to me about an example where they have been made to feel unsafe or at risk online and ask what I, as their MP, am going to do about it. I know that urgency to act is felt by so many colleagues across party boundaries, both in this Hall today and across the House.

The petition focuses on particular aspects where we could do more to ensure that parents have both the right ability to provide oversight for children on social media and access to really important data after bereavement. I know that, following the petition, there has been some important progress from the Online Safety Act to give some powers to coroners and to Ofcom to ensure that in certain circumstances they can support parents' ability to access that data, but as colleagues have pointed out, there are clear areas in which it does not go far enough.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) set out, it is pretty clear that at the moment some ambiguity in the legal position is being used as an excuse by social media companies not to act. We should not tolerate that; we should do all we can, hopefully as a Government, to clarify the position. Collectively, we should not be letting social media companies off the hook for not doing everything in their power to give the families access to the data where no right-minded individual could see any reason not to and where no right-minded individual or agency is likely to seek recourse against them for doing so. So many Members have rightly pointed out that that feels like an excuse, not a reason, to fail to disclose data. We should not tolerate that excuse from companies that we come into contact with in our work as representatives.

However, as has rightly been pointed out, it is important that we do not just look at this issue in the context of the existing legislation. We know that there are very real risks after bereavement that the data could be deleted. As my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy) pointed out, thinking about ways in which we can compel earlier notification to Ofcom and to social media companies and online platforms that can have that data in order to remove that risk at source is surely a common-sense way of ensuring that that risk to getting justice and getting closure can be closed off.

Moreover, the petitioner and many others rightly point out and ask us to reflect on the fact that if we are really interested in child safeguarding and keeping young people safe, it simply cannot be only after a tragedy, after bereavement, that the opportunity for parental oversight and involvement takes place. My hon. Friend

the Member for Sunderland Central rightly set out some of the very real and justified concerns that children's charities and advocates have about unfettered and complete access, but as many other Members have set out, that should not be the case. It should not be beyond us to reason and think through how, in exactly the same way that parents provide oversight over every other aspect of a young person's life, they can have access to the best and most sensible ways to do so on this platform, too. As the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) pointed out, thinking about the age at which young people can meaningfully and rightfully consent to opting out of parental oversight has to be part of that process.

It is fair to say that a few hon. Members are concerned that the implementation of the Online Safety Act, as it is currently envisaged and as some of Ofcom's recent publications show, may fall short of doing justice to the importance of the issues. Whether it is considering what more we can do to protect young people from imagery and content relating to suicide and self-harm on social media, ensuring that we do not tolerate technical infeasibility as an excuse for tech companies not to act on the most egregious forms of harm, or having well-intentioned and important conversations about the right age of consent, to which many Members have alluded today, there is clearly a lot more that we can do collectively.

Monica Harding: Will the hon. Member go further and say that Ofcom's implementation so far has been weak, overly cautious and fundamentally disappointing? Does he concur that it is unfair to put parents in the intolerably pressured situation of being the policemen of their children's social media activity?

Alistair Strathern: Some aspects of how Ofcom has said it will take these matters forward are to be welcomed, but I absolutely agree with the underlying sentiment of the hon. Lady's comment. Currently, what has been set out does not go anywhere near far enough. As representatives of our communities and of the families who want to do everything possible to keep young people safe from online harm, it is our responsibility to ensure that we are holding Ofcom accountable for being far more ambitious about how it can most creatively and robustly deploy the powers that we are giving it to keep young people safe.

Lola McEvoy: I thank my hon. Friend for his impressive and articulate outlining of the debate so far. Will he join my calls for Ofcom to strengthen the upcoming children's code and, as the code is not yet published, to use this opportunity to include functionality, a stronger dynamic risk assessment—a live document that will be constantly updated—and the measures that my hon. Friend has laid out for the smaller and riskier platforms?

Alistair Strathern: I concur wholeheartedly. My hon. Friend has been a tireless campaigner on this issue, both in our debate today and throughout the time I have known her—a very short time, but an impressive one none the less. As she rightly points out, the children's code is a real opportunity to do right by the intentions of the legislation and by the collective ambition that we are discussing today. From my hon. Friend to the children's commissioner, campaigners on the issue are pretty united about the opportunity that a more ambitious code could deliver for safeguarding young people.

[Alistair Strathern]

For far too long, we have allowed young people to be exposed to a level of harm online that we would not tolerate in any other aspect of life. It is potentially understandable, but not excusable, that as legislators we are sometimes more comfortable imposing restrictions or acting in areas where we have more direct lived experience, as in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill or the Tobacco and Vapes Bill. Those are tangible things that we are comfortable and used to voting and making laws on, whereas online harm can sometimes feel a bit more nebulous and a bit tougher. However, that is no excuse not to act. The failure to act is written across the tragedies experienced by so many families across the country and so many campaigners in the room today. We must do better, and we have to make sure that this is the Parliament in which we do.

5.58 pm

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I pay tribute to Ellen and all the families for their tireless campaigning and for this petition, which 119 people in my Bournemouth West constituency signed. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Tom Collins), I want to talk about some of the broader harms of social media and smartphone use that students and parents have raised with me. This is particularly salient in the context of announcements this week about the removal of independent fact-checking from Meta and other platforms.

Last week, I visited Bourne academy, a secondary school in my constituency that is taking part in the Dorset boys' impact hub project. The project aims to champion the experiences of young boys who face inequalities, and provide a platform for their voices. The boys I met raised a range of issues, from knife crime to the desire for safe and legal spaces to practise graffiti art, but the thing I found most interesting was that we got into a long conversation about the impact of social media in their lives and its uses in their socialising. Frankly, I was shocked by some of the things they told me about the content they are pushed on these platforms.

The boys mentioned Reddit and Instagram as particularly vile examples of distressing content: as soon as they log on to those platforms things like videos of people being decapitated and other forms of serious violence are pushed. They said that Snapchat is a platform where group chats are regularly used to conduct cyber-bullying and to spread rumours, with very little accountability because all the messages disappear within 24 hours. Clearly, as it stands what we have is not working to protect young people. The boys also reported that age restrictions are incredibly easy to get around, whatever the age restriction.

[SIR DESMOND SWAYNE *in the Chair*]

It is worth noting that Bourne academy has a no-phones policy. Kids are not even allowed to use them during breaks, which caused consternation among the young people. It is clear that smartphones and social media are changing how young people interact and socialise. This can expose them, with very little oversight, to high volumes of violent, inappropriate and harmful content, which many of us will not be used to in our lives. Social

media is linked to wellbeing and self-esteem issues, which can have a direct impact on behaviours and the views young people hold, and in some cases is linked to significant increases in young people reporting anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicidal ideation.

Will the Minister outline what further steps the Government are taking to protect young people from harmful content and to prevent young people from circumventing age restrictions? We have discussed potentially raising those restrictions, but that is also key.

I have been contacted by parents about this issue, and there is growing support for the Smartphone Free Childhood movement in Bournemouth and throughout the country. One parent of a five-year-old daughter got in touch with me. He shared some very misogynistic content that he came across and expressed worry about it being so easy for her to access that content. Other schools in my constituency have spoken specifically about the impact of misogynistic content on school behaviour, and the extra effort they have to make to try to address it without the toolkits that they need.

It is not just about content. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) mentioned, platforms produce compulsive and addictive behaviours. Another parent, a father of two who is an active member of the Smartphone Free Childhood movement, raised with me the addictive design features, from the pull to refresh to the gamification, photo scrolling and push notifications. He has a lot to say on that because he was somebody who designed such features for smartphones and social media. He has a real concern about how they affect both children and adults. Does the Minister's assessment of online safety include an assessment of the impacts of addictive and compulsive features? What steps is the Department taking to address them?

Among the parents I have spoken to there is a variety of views about what the answer is. Some want a ban on smartphones for under-16s; some want an Australia-style under-16 ban on social media; and some would prefer a school-led approach. Many are simply worried about how to push back on the social pressure that they get from very young children to have smartphones and access to social media. Will the Minister outline what steps her Department is taking to engage young people, parents and schools about the best way to find an appropriate solution?

As we have heard from many Members, technological change often goes faster than we can deal with. We cannot keep up with it. We have the ability to regulate it, but it is a bit too slow. I commend the Ministers and the Government for their work on this issue, but encourage them to take heed of the things we have heard about today, support the efforts by parents and teachers to help young people to grapple with the challenges, and ensure that the measures we introduce reflect the need to protect and safeguard young people sufficiently.

6.4 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I am delighted to contribute to this extremely important debate. I thank the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) for setting out in such a well-informed and balanced way the issues we are considering.

With your permission, Sir Desmond, may I take this opportunity to address Ellen Roome directly? I want to pay tribute to your great courage and bravery. I am a mother of two young children. I cannot begin to imagine what you have been through. To start this petition and push this campaign forward in the way that you have is—

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): Order.

Munira Wilson: I did ask your permission, Sir Desmond.

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): No; all remarks are addressed to the Chair.

Munira Wilson: I just want to pay tribute.

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): Do, but do it to the Chair.

Munira Wilson: Okay. I will do so now. Thank you, Sir Desmond.

I pay tribute to Ellen for her campaign. I also want to say how cross I am that Ellen is having to push this campaign to get access to Jools' online data. A number of us who were here during the passage of the Online Safety Act in the previous Parliament attended a meeting organised by Baroness Kidron, at which she brought together Ian Russell and some of the lawyers who supported him in Molly's case. They talked powerfully about the battles they had to go through to access data. Baroness Kidron led a really strong campaign to change the law but, sadly, it has still not happened, which is why we are here today.

The use of social media accounts is now prolific across society, especially for young people. Ofcom's 2023 Online Nation report highlighted the fact that children aged eight to 10 spent an average of two hours and 23 minutes a day online. That rose gradually to an average of four hours and 35 minutes online daily—the equivalent of 66 days online per year—for 15 to 17-year-olds. That is just an average; we all know that a number of young people spend far more time than that online.

The digital age has transformed the way we live, communicate and interact, and social media in particular has become an integral part of our daily lives, especially for children. Although the platforms offer numerous benefits, they also pose significant risks. As Liberal Democrats, we advocate a balanced approach that respects the privacy of our young people while ensuring their safety and wellbeing.

The right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) touched on the point that of those aged eight to 17 with profiles on social media, video sharing platforms or messaging platforms, nearly six in 10 have said they use more than one profile on any particular social media app or site. When asked why, just under a quarter said it was because one account was just for parents and families to see, while a similar proportion said that one account was for close friends and one was for everyone else. Meanwhile, 13% of eight to 17-year-olds who had more than one profile said that one account was for the "real me" and another contained edited, filtered posts or photos. Those statistics tell us an awful lot.

Children themselves are concerned about their time online. An Ofcom report last year showed that young adults were less likely than older people to think they had a good balance between their online and offline lives.

Another Ofcom survey showed that children's concern about their time online increases with age. Indeed, last year the Children's Commissioner published a brilliant report on the "Big Ambition" survey, in which she spoke to more than 367,000 children. The survey found that staying safe online was a huge issue and priority for many young people.

We must remember that young people want to be consulted and involved in the discussion and solutions. It is not just about us telling them what is right, and it is not about the tech companies telling them what is right: it is about involving young people in the solutions. That is why the ongoing inquiry into youth violence and social media by the Youth Parliament is so important. I urge young people throughout the country to participate in the inquiry by sharing their experiences on social media, and I keenly await the publication of the inquiry's findings.

Behind each of the statistics I have cited are young people, their peers and their families. I have heard from some of those parents and young people in my constituency, and I thank the 465 people in Twickenham who signed the petition. I also speak as the mother of two young children. I have a six-year-old and a 10-year-old, and the 10-year-old is desperately begging her parents every single day for a smartphone. Some of her friends already have their own YouTube channel. We are trying to delay as long as we can—hopefully until some time into her secondary schooling—before we give her a phone. I know, as a parent and from hearing from other parents and young people in my constituency, that we as legislators have a responsibility to act.

I am afraid it was after many years of delay that the Conservative Government introduced the Online Safety Act. The Liberal Democrats welcomed a number of the measures in the Act as an important step forward, and we support its swift implementation. Empowering coroners to obtain information from online services about a deceased child's online activity was a significant step in the right direction but, as we have heard so powerfully today, there is a strong case to be made for parents to be able to access data after their child is deceased. That provision should be made retrospective as well. As others have pointed out, the data Bill provides an ideal opportunity to explore such a change and how it could work.

However, measures often come too late, and too many young people's lives have been tragically lost already. We cannot afford to delay before we take some sort of action, and there is much more we can do to protect our children and young people online by putting in place more guardrails, as others have described them. Social media companies must do more to enforce their existing minimum-age requirements, using the latest age-verification technology. They must do more to create age-appropriate digital environments and increase transparency in their data practices. Ofcom should do more to use the full powers of the Online Safety Act, including looking at the harms caused by the functionality and design of social media, as well as the content.

After meeting organisations such as the Internet Watch Foundation, 5Rights and the Molly Rose Foundation, it is clear to me that we must push for not just strong regulation but safety by design. We must recognise that children and teenagers are particularly vulnerable to the dangers of the online world. Cyber-bullying, exposure to harmful content and online prejudices are just a few of the threats they face. Both the Government and the

[Munira Wilson]

social media companies must do much more to protect children from harmful content and activity online. I would like to hear what the Government are doing to work with Ofcom to ensure that children are protected during the transition period.

We must also be mindful of the importance of privacy and trust. There are good reasons why parents cannot access children's data while they are alive. That is an important safeguard, and we have heard some of the reasons for having it. Adolescence is a time of exploration and self-discovery, and young people need space to express themselves freely. However, that safeguard relies on children being kept safe online, which is patently not currently the case, so Ofcom and social media companies need to do much more on that front. Any measures that we implement must strike a delicate balance between safeguarding children and respecting their right to privacy.

Education is crucial to achieving that balance. Schools need to teach children about online dangers and how to use the internet and social media safely and responsibly. Parents must also be empowered to protect our children online—I say that as a parent who feels like I am way behind my younger children—including through digital literacy education and advice and support on best practice. Dare I say, although this is not necessarily a politically expedient thing to say, that we parents also have a lot of responsibility over how much time we allow our children to spend online and what devices we give them access to. It is hard when our children face so much peer pressure, but we need to take responsibility too.

The Education Committee report last year, “Screen time: impacts on education and wellbeing”, also called for education, as well as a cross-Government, holistic approach. It said:

“Government should work across departments including DHSC, DSIT, Education and the Home Office to produce guidance for parents on how to best manage and understand the impact of screen time on their children.”

I look forward to what the Minister has to say on that point. That is why the Liberal Democrats are also calling on the Government to create an independent children's online safety advocate, as called for by the NSPCC, which would act like a consumer watchdog to promote and protect children's interests. We must ensure that proper safeguards are in place and that children are not just protected from online harms but empowered to exercise their digital rights.

This petition on parental access to children's social media accounts highlights a critical issue that demands our attention. As we navigate the complexities of the digital age, we must prioritise the safety and wellbeing of our children. By implementing thoughtful and balanced measures, we can protect our young people from the dangers of the online world while respecting their right to privacy. Let us move forward with compassion, determination and a commitment to creating a safer digital future for our children. Thank you, and with apologies, Sir Desmond.

6.16 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond, and I thank the hon. Member for Sunderland Central

(Lewis Atkinson) for introducing this debate. I would like to start by thanking Ellen Roome for her determined work in fighting to highlight this issue. Her courage and her stoicism in pursuing this cause have been hugely impressive, and Parliament would not be debating this today were it not for her impassioned commitment.

This e-petition has garnered some 126,000 signatures in support of calls to give parents and guardians the right to access the social media accounts of their children. We have heard many important contributions from Members this afternoon, and I am sure that parents across their constituencies will be grateful to them for doing so. The hon. Members for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) and for Darlington (Lola McEvoy) paid tribute to Ellen Roome and have shared her own words. The hon. Members for Sunderland Central and for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) spoke about the refusal of social media companies to release data, citing legal restrictions. The hon. Members for Worcester (Tom Collins) and for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) spoke of the impact of harmful content on children's development, and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) spoke about how current legislation gives control to children as young as 13.

With the vast majority of children now having access to a phone or tablet by the age of 12, children are exposed to an enormous range of content online. Many children are being exposed to social media content that is inappropriate and dangerous and poses substantial risks to safety and development. There has been a growing crisis in children's mental health, with recent research highlighting that 32% of eight to 17-year-olds state that they have viewed worrying or upsetting online content in the last 12 months, yet only 20% of parents with children and teenagers in that age group report their child telling them they had seen something online that scared or upset them during the same timeframe. Evidence has shown that the widening of access to the internet has seen more children moving away from social interactions, with the subsequent detrimental impacts on mental health and social development.

We welcome much of the work that this Government are doing on protections for children by building on the foundations laid by the previous Government, but could I ask the Minister what is being done to increase mental health support for children? In January last year the Labour party pledged to introduce specialist mental health support for children and young people in every school, as well as open-access children and young people's mental health hubs in every community, as part of the child health action plan. Although I appreciate that it is not part of her brief, could the Minister outline what progress the Government are making towards the delivery of those pledges, as they relate to this topic more broadly?

Keeping children safe online in the current media landscape is a challenge that will require agile and adroit legislation that simultaneously keeps pace with technological developments and reflects cultural usage of media platforms. We also need to recognise the power that social media giants now hold, and ensuring accountability will be a key aspect of any legislation. We must ensure that parents have the right to be able to ensure that their children are safe from harm on platforms, especially in circumstances where children may be being mistreated.

I have previously heard Ellen describe how social media companies have abdicated responsibility in assisting in the disclosure of messages that could help to identify how a tragedy has occurred. In Jools' case, TikTok has not released any of the messages on his account, and Instagram Meta has released some but not all. Any parent should be concerned that they will not have the right to access details of their child's online life, even if it is suspected to have contributed to their death. Parents like Ellen are currently required to take legal action to pursue the release of such information and, even if they have the financial resources to do so, why should any parent be forced to go to such lengths just to find out what may be, at best, critical information and, at worst, closure? The majority of parents do not even have access to such resources.

As a newly elected Member, I will not stand here and pretend that the previous Government got everything right, but the Online Safety Act was a crucial and positive step forward to keeping more children and young people safe online so that fewer families have to face situations like those we have heard and spoken about in this debate. Under section 101 of the Act, Ofcom has the power to support the investigation of a coroner or procurator fiscal into the death of a child via the data preservation measure. The measure came into effect under the previous Government in April last year, and it is under this section that the amendment that would be Jools' law would sit.

Although the current iteration of section 101 is a step in the right direction, it is not an easily accessible outcome and it can only be put into effect following a tragedy. In many instances, parental access to social media accounts could prevent tragic outcomes. Do the Government plan to introduce legislation to give parents and guardians the right to access their child's social media accounts and the messages contained within them? If they do, would that build on the Online Safety Act?

There are further considerations that must be taken into account, such as safeguarding. Though parental access to children's social media accounts may sound like a simple and prudent solution, not every child has parental figures who have their best interests at heart, and that includes vulnerable children in a family with an abusive parent. A child who is seeking help in communicating domestic abuse to friends or organisations may find their only avenue of escape is compromised. There may also be instances in which a parent could use their child's social media account to gain access to information about other children and teenagers. There are therefore wider implications to granting parents unrestricted access to the information of children other than their own, as that could unintentionally make unsolicited and inappropriate contact easier. Would the Minister consider how parental access rights could be designed to give parents the ability to monitor their children's safety and to ensure children have the privacy they may need to facilitate their own safety, and how such measures could be designed so as not to be exploited by any of the parties that are subject to them?

I was reassured to see the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology meeting bereaved parents who have lost children after being influenced by harmful content online. I also welcome the publishing of the Secretary of State's "Draft Statement of Strategic Priorities for online safety" in November last year,

which provided clarity on the framework that the Government will expect the independent regulator to work within. The Secretary of State has stated that the Government will be

"implementing safety by design to stop...harm occurring in the first place",

and we should consider whether the expectation should fall on users themselves to take precautionary steps to avoid severely harmful content. Given how instrumental algorithms are in pushing themed content to users' feeds, what plans do the Government have to give users the ability to opt out or reset these algorithms?

We support parents in raising concerns about content they do not want their children to see by requiring sites to take measures to remove content as soon as it is flagged. Since the introduction of the 2023 Act, we have seen many cases in which the response from platforms has been far quicker than before, and we would welcome a detailed plan that lays out how the Government will ensure that all companies act quickly and the cost of their not doing so.

It is right that services must assess any risk to children from using their platforms and set appropriate age restrictions to ensure that child users have age-appropriate experiences and are shielded from harmful content, such as pornography or content relating to violence, self-harm, eating disorders or even suicide. That is why the last Government tightened up age restrictions by requiring social media companies to enforce their age limits consistently and protect their child users, but many parents still believe that these age limits are too easily circumvented by children lying about their age. The Government talk of ensuring that age-assurance technology to protect children is being effectively deployed, but how do the Government intend to ensure this? How do they intend to ensure that companies are investing in the most up-to-date technology to facilitate that? Will the Government proactively stress-test that capability and, if so, how?

For all of this, Ofcom plays a vital role. As an evidence-based regulator, its task is to regulate the trust and safety systems and processes. Its role is not necessarily to police individual pieces of content; it is to ensure companies have the correct measures in place to minimise harms to users. At the end of last year, we heard about how the Government had informed Ofcom that it would need to build more safety measures into these systems. I would welcome the Minister's outlining how the Government will aid Ofcom in its aims and ensure that any Government support needed will be supplied. These regulations would not be anything without empowering Ofcom to take action, which is why we gave it powers to issue fines of up to £18 million or 10% of global revenue, whichever is higher, or to pursue criminal investigations into senior managers if they fail to comply with enforcement notices. Will the Minister outline what steps the Government are taking to make sure that Ofcom brings forward its children's safety codes and guidance in April?

As we have all seen, technology keeps moving and advancements are constantly made, so the risk of digital progress outstripping the pace of legislation is an all too real prospect. We must embrace technology and understand that the internet and social media, embedded in our daily lives, can be a force for good, but we must also understand that checks and balances are essential if we are to ensure a safe online environment not only for

[*Ben Obese-Jecty*]

today's users but for those newly entering the online world. It is for the Government not only to guarantee an environment conducive to users of all ages, but to ensure that parents have the confidence that the online environment can be made as safe as they strive to make the home environment.

6.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Feryal Clark): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I start by paying tribute to Ellen Roome both for launching this petition and for all the campaigning she has done in this area. Let us take a moment to remember her son, Jools. As a parent, I know that we do everything to keep our children safe. We teach them how to cross a road and why it matters not to talk to strangers—we do all we can, but it can still be terrifying to think about what our children are exposed to, even in the safety of our own homes. I can only imagine how it would feel for a parent not to know how or why their child lost their life. I know that parents across the country feel the same way.

As we have heard, Ellen's petition received over 120,000 signatures between 10 May and the dissolution of Parliament on 30 May. That shows the strength of feeling on this issue, and I am grateful to the brave parents, including Ellen, Ian and others who campaigned on this issue during the passage of the Online Safety Act, who continue to shine a light on it. The Secretary of State has met them a number of times, and their views are absolutely crucial to the work we are doing in this area. Finally, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) for securing a debate on this e-petition on behalf of the Petitions Committee, along with other hon. and right hon. Members for their powerful contributions.

I know how long it has taken to get the Online Safety Act across the line. It is not a perfect piece of legislation, and the delay in delivering it has come at a heartbreaking human cost. As the Secretary of State has set out numerous times, we are working to implement the Act as quickly as we possibly can so that the protections it puts in place can begin to change the online world that our children experience.

The Act has two provisions relevant to this debate. First, section 101 seeks to address problems faced when there is uncertainty over the circumstances leading to the death of a child. The provision supports coroners and procurators fiscal in their investigations by giving Ofcom the power to require information about a child's online activity following a request from the investigating coroner. It is already in force, and the coroners have begun to make use of the powers available to them.

Secondly, section 75 imposes additional duties on categorised services to be transparent with parents regarding a company's data disclosure processes following the death of a child. We have been clear that we plan to build on the Online Safety Act where it does not go far enough, and the Secretary of State only yesterday set out how the Online Safety Act is uneven and, in some cases, unsatisfactory. He also set out the need for Parliament to learn to legislate much faster—we cannot wait another 10 years to make changes to the legislation.

At the end of last year, the Secretary of State decided to use his powers to issue a statement of strategic priorities to Ofcom, asking them to ensure that safety is embedded in our online world from the very start. That is why the Government will also seek to establish a data preservation process through clause 122 of the Data (Use and Access) Bill. The proposed clause will require Ofcom to issue a data preservation notice to specified companies at the request of the coroner or, in Scotland, the procurator fiscal. That will require these companies to preserve information relating to the use of their services by the child who has died. This proposal fulfils a manifesto commitment to further strengthen powers, and will help coroners understand the tragic circumstances surrounding a child's death.

Let me turn to the matter of coroners sharing information with families. Interested persons, including bereaved families, have the right to receive evidence from coroners, subject to their judicial discretion. The chief coroner has provided detailed guidance on this. Coroners have a statutory duty to issue a prevention of future deaths report if their investigation reveals that future deaths could be prevented by one or more measures. Evidence accessed via Ofcom powers will help to inform a decision on whether a report should be issued.

I know from parents and children just how complex this issue is. The Secretary of State recently visited the NSPCC, where he met a group of young people to understand more about their lives online. The NSPCC was concerned that giving parents complete access to their children's social media accounts could raise complex issues around children's rights to privacy and, in extreme cases—as we have heard today—safeguarding. For example, as raised earlier, if a child is exploring their sexuality online, they may not want their parents to know and they would be right to expect that privacy.

All Members raised the retrospective application of section 101 of the Act. Ofcom's powers to require information from companies on behalf of coroners can still be used where a second coroner's inquest is ordered. Ofcom can use these powers on the instruction of a coroner. Ofcom will also be able to use data preservation notices in the event that a second coroner's inquest is ordered. Any personal data that is captured by the data preservation notice, and held by the online service at the time of issue, will still be in scope and must be retained upon receipt of notice. However, I have heard very powerfully from all Members today about the lengths parents have to go to request a second inquest and about the associated costs. As I have said, the legislation is not perfect and there is room for improvement, and I would like to meet Members and parents to explore this matter further. We need to continue to review the legislation.

When it comes to age limits, a smartphone and social media ban for under-16s has been raised. We are aware of the ongoing debate as to what age children should have smartphones or access to social media. As the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology has previously said, there are no current plans to implement a smartphone or social media ban for children. We will continue to do what is necessary to keep our children safe online.

Cameron Thomas: On that note, we have heard from several Members today about their concerns for children's mental health, when their expectations are often measured against heavily doctored images they see online. Will the Minister commit to use and/or amend legislation that

commits hosts—as is common with regulated news outlets—to clearly identify doctored imagery, and the accounts and pages that spread them?

Feryal Clark: I will come to that point.

On the issue of a ban on smartphones and social media for under-16s, we are focused on building the evidence base to inform any future action. We have launched a research project looking at the links between social media and children's wellbeing. I heard from the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding) that that needs to come forward and I will pass that on to my colleagues in the Department.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) mentioned the private Member's Bill in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister). We are aware of his Bill and share his commitment to keeping children safe online. We are aware of the ongoing discussion around children's social media and smartphone use, and it is important that we allocate sufficient time to properly debate the issue. We are focused on implementing the Online Safety Act and building the evidence base to inform any future action. Of course, we look forward to seeing the detail of my hon. Friend's proposal and the Government will set out their position on that in line with the parliamentary process.

My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy) raised the issue of Ofcom's ambitions. Ofcom has said that its codes will be iterative, and the Secretary of State's statement will outline clear objectives for it to require services to improve safety for their users.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale) mentioned engagement with children, and we know how important that is. Ofcom engaged with thousands of children when developing its codes, and the Children's Commissioner is a statutory consultee on those codes, but of course we must do more.

The hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) raised the matter of mental health services and our commitment in that regard. He is right that the Government's manifesto commits to rolling out Young Futures hubs. That national network is expected to bring local services together to deliver support for not only teenagers at risk of being drawn into crime, but those facing mental health challenges, and, where appropriate, to deliver universal youth provision. As he rightly said, that is within the health portfolio, but I am happy to write to him with more detail on where the programme is.

We want to empower parents to keep their children safe online. We must also protect children's right to express themselves freely, and safeguard their dignity and autonomy online.

Damian Hinds: The Minister spoke earlier about age limits. I was not sure if she had finished responding to Members' comments and questions, and whether she would be able to comment on not only what the various age thresholds should be, but what they mean. In particular, if the GDPR age is 13, does that mean that parental controls can effectively be switched off by somebody of age 13, 14 or 15?

Feryal Clark: I am sure the right hon. Gentleman's party would have discussed the issue of the age limit and why it was 13 during the passage of the Online Safety Act.

Damian Hinds: Will the hon. Lady write to me?

Feryal Clark: I am more than happy to write to him in detail on why the age limit has been set at 13. As I said, there is currently a live discussion about raising the age and evidence is being collated.

The challenge of keeping our children safe in a fast-moving world is one that we all—Government, social media platforms, parents and society at large—share. As we try to find the solutions, we are committed to working together and continuing conversations around access to data in the event of the tragic death of a child.

I will finish by again thanking Ellen for her tireless campaigning. I also thank all the speakers for their thoughtful contributions. I know that Ellen has waited a long time for change and we still have a long way to go. Working with Ellen, the Bereaved Families for Online Safety group, other parents and civil society organisations, we will build a better online world for our children.

6.39 pm

Lewis Atkinson: I thank Members from across the House for their contributions to this well attended and powerful debate. We have demonstrated significant consensus across the House about the need to continue to strengthen and evolve online regulation, which, as the petition shows, is a matter of significant public concern. I think it is fair to say that the public expect Parliament to work on a cross-party basis on these issues, and I hope that in future months we can continue the debate in the spirit in which it has been conducted today.

I thank the Minister for her response. I particularly welcome her indication that the Government will give consideration to any potential changes to the forthcoming data Bill to put it beyond doubt that, in historic cases such as Jools', parents have rights to access data following bereavement and that the powers that have been set out to coroners can be applied without undue financial penalty or campaigning by parents like Ellen.

Of course, the people that we have not heard from today are the social media companies, although I am sure they are listening to us all. I invite them to demonstrate that they genuinely want to do the right thing—to get in touch and do the right thing for bereaved parents like Ellen; not to hide behind data protection regulations; and to actively engage with policymakers and families to get this right, to allow children to be protected and, in tragic cases when a child has died, to give parents the opportunity to grieve properly.

I thank the Petitions Committee staff for their assistance in organising and preparing the debate, which it has been an honour to lead. It is right that I use the final words of the debate to pay tribute to the 126,000 petitioners, and in particular to Ellen Roome: may Jools' memory always be a blessing, and I sincerely hope that today's debate helps you and other bereaved families get the data and the answers that you need.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 661407 relating to children's social media accounts.

6.42 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 13 January 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Live Events Ticketing: Resale and Pricing Practices

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): The UK has a world-leading music and live events sector, which plays an important role in our national life and supports economic growth across the country. However, the Government are concerned that tickets for many live events have become inaccessible to fans due to highly inflated ticket prices on the resale market. In addition, new practices within the live events sector, such as dynamic pricing, are presenting challenges for fans when buying tickets, particularly around transparency.

We want to put fans first, ensure that they are treated fairly and, in so doing, support an economically successful live events sector.

To support these objectives, the Department for Business and Trade and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport have published a consultation on the resale of live events tickets and a call for evidence on pricing practices in the live events sector, which are available on www.gov.uk.

Consultation on the resale of live events tickets

The Government recognise that a well-functioning ticket resale market can play an important role: helping to redistribute tickets between genuine fans; and allowing those who cannot attend an event to give an opportunity to others to get a ticket, while recouping some or all of their costs. However, it appears that professional ticket touts are systematically buying up tickets on the primary market and then reselling them to fans at often hugely inflated prices, with none of the profits going back to the performer, venue or the live events sector more generally. To address these issues, the Government are seeking views on a range of possible options, including:

- Limits on ticket resale, such as via a price cap, making it illegal for tickets to be resold at more than a certain percentage above the original price, and fixed limits on the number of tickets that a seller can resell;

- Increasing the accountability of secondary ticketing platforms by placing a duty on them to ensure that information provided by sellers is accurate;

- Supporting the enforcement of existing consumer protection laws by updating provisions in the Consumer Rights Act 2015 to make enforcement more efficient and effective, including a licensing regime focused on resale platforms; and

- Encouraging industry-led actions to improve the transparency and accessibility of ticket sales, for example by phasing ticket distribution.

Call for evidence on pricing practices in the live events sector

The live events sector has adopted new approaches to selling tickets, including pricing strategies using new technologies. These practices are changing both how the system works and the experiences of fans when they purchase tickets. It is important that fans are treated fairly and openly with timely, transparent and accurate information being presented ahead of sales, particularly when demand is high.

The call for evidence is seeking views to determine if there is a case for future intervention, specifically examining:

- How the ticketing market works in the UK, when and how tickets are sold using dynamic pricing, and other technologies used to sell tickets;

- If and how consumers have been impaired by a lack of transparency, for example the transparency and timeliness of information provided to inform purchasing decisions, and the extent of hidden fees, tiered pricing or pressure selling; and

- Whether the current legal framework provides sufficient protection, including whether gaps exist or if there is potential for new harms arising from emerging trends.

Next steps

The consultation and call for evidence will be open for 12 weeks. We encourage all interested stakeholders, including fans, ticketing platforms and the wider live events sector, to respond.

I am placing a copy of the consultation and the call for evidence in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS359]

TREASURY

UK-China Economic and Financial Dialogue: 2025

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): I visited China 10-13 January to deliver the 2025 UK-China economic and financial dialogue.

Growing the economy is the No.1 mission of this Government. But that growth must be secure and resilient, built on the stable foundations that we have prioritised as we deliver on our Plan for Change and embark on a decade of national renewal.

National security and growth are not opposed. They are mutually reinforcing. We must and will continue to engage with international partners on trade and investment to grow our economy, while ensuring that our security and values are not compromised.

This means finding the right way to build a stable and balanced relationship with China. One that recognises the importance of co-operation in addressing the global issues we face, competing where our interests differ, and challenging robustly where we must.

It is for this reason that I visited Beijing and Shanghai for an economic and financial dialogue with China. I was accompanied by the Governor of the Bank of England, the chief executive of the Financial Conduct Authority, and representatives from Britain's financial services firms. This dialogue unlocked market access for UK exporters in financial services and agri-products, providing greater certainty for business and an expected boost to the UK economy of £600 million over five years.

However, this is not a return to the "golden era" of UK-China relations. Throughout the visit, I was clear that while we must co-operate on areas of mutual interest, we will also confidently express our economic and trade concerns to the Chinese, including on market access and wider market distorting practices. A key outcome of this dialogue is that we have secured China's commitment to improve existing channels so that we can openly discuss

sensitive issues and the ways in which they impact our economy. Our engagement also advanced wider UK interests. I raised a range of UK concerns in meetings with Chinese Government counterparts, including Russia's illegal war in Ukraine, developments in constraints on rights and freedoms in Hong Kong, and human rights. Our approach ensures we can confidently challenge China on areas where we disagree and uphold the UK's national security—the first duty of our Government.

This visit builds a platform for a long-term relationship with China that works squarely in our national interest, ensuring our economy has the broad base and resilient foundations for the growth that makes working people in every corner of Britain better off.

[HCWS361]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Cambridge Waste Water Treatment Plant Relocation

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): This Government have committed to rebuilding Britain, delivering 1.5 million new homes, along with the critical infrastructure that underpins economic growth. As set out in the “Plan for Change”, we will deliver housing in the right places, supporting our towns and cities to grow, and providing the homes that people want, near to businesses and employment opportunities. This Government are therefore committed to growth and have promised to take tough decisions to get Britain building.

One of our first actions was therefore to revise the national planning policy framework, which was formalised on 12 December 2024. This marks the next step in radically reforming the planning system to meet the needs of the country and made major changes to the rules around the green belt. It is therefore right that the application is now properly analysed, with consideration given to the Government's updated policies.

This statement confirms that it is necessary to extend the deadline for the Secretary of State's decision on the application by Anglian Water, under the Planning Act 2008, for the Cambridge waste water treatment plant relocation project development consent order (DCO).

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make his decision within three months of receipt of the examining authority's report, unless the power under section 107(3) is exercised to extend the deadline and a ministerial statement is made to Parliament announcing the new deadline.

The DCO application for the Cambridge waste water treatment plant relocation project was received by the Planning Inspectorate under the previous Government's planning system.

The deadline for this decision is therefore to be further extended to 14 April 2025, to enable the application to be analysed in the light of this key policy update.

The decision to set the new deadline for this application is without prejudice to the decision on whether to grant or refuse development consent.

[HCWS362]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Artificial Intelligence Opportunities Action Plan

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): In July, I commissioned Matt Clifford CBE, tech entrepreneur and chair of the Advanced Research and Invention Agency, to develop an AI opportunities action plan. Today, that plan, and the Government's response to it, have been published.

This Government promised to deliver change and improve lives in every part of the country; to grow a faster, fairer economy with good jobs that put more money in working people's pockets; and to rebuild our crumbling public services and provide our citizens with the world-class healthcare and education they deserve.

That clear sense of purpose has fundamentally shaped our approach to AI. This is no longer a technology that belongs in a distant future—the AI revolution is already happening, and it will define the decade to come. We must decide whether we sit back and wait for this technology to shape our lives or get ahead and ensure that British people are the first to benefit.

This Government are hugely optimistic about AI's potential to change our country for the better and deliver a decade of national renewal. AI is at the heart of our plan for change. From building an NHS fit for the future and making Britain a clean energy superpower, to taking back our streets and bringing down the barriers to opportunity for all, none of our national missions are possible without embracing the power of technology. Most importantly, an AI-powered economy will improve living standards for working people across the country.

We have led the world on AI safety. Now, we have a responsibility to capitalise on our unique position to provide global leadership in seizing the opportunities of AI. The AI opportunities action plan proposes 50 recommendations reflecting the scale and pace required to strengthen the foundations of the UK's AI ecosystem, deliver real change for citizens through using AI in the public and private sectors, and securing our future by ensuring the UK is a first mover on AI.

In our response, we set out how we intend to shape the application of AI within a modern social market economy, based on the principles of shared economic prosperity, improved public services and increased personal opportunities. To deliver the plan's recommendations, we are taking decisive action to deliver enduring change:

Creating AI growth zones, areas with enhanced access to power and streamlined planning approvals, to establish new public-private partnerships and accelerate the development of AI infrastructure on UK soil.

Expanding our sovereign AI compute capacity by at least 20 times by 2030, ensuring that the UK can keep pace as our compute needs grow.

Creating a new AI Energy Council, bringing together industry leaders from the energy and AI sectors, co-chaired by me and the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero. The Energy Council will provide expert insight on the energy needs of AI, alongside opportunities to accelerate investment in the develop of renewable and innovative energy solutions to meet those needs.

Launching a new dedicated team with a mandate to strengthen the UK's sovereign AI capabilities by supporting our national champions at the frontier of AI. Operating

with the agility of the vaccines task force, the team will partner with AI companies and use every tool at Government's disposal to ensure they have access to the compute, data and talent they need to succeed.

The action plan shows us that we have a narrow window to secure our stake in the future of AI, and deliver a better future for British people. We must take decisive action before it is too late. Today, we have set out our plan to secure our global leadership in the AI

revolution and fulfil our fundamental promise to the British people. This is a top priority for the Prime Minister. Working right across Government, we will use AI to grow our economy, rebuild our broken public services and improve living standards for working people. Together, we will ensure that British citizens are the first to benefit from the extraordinary opportunities this technology can offer.

[HCWS360]

Written Correction

Monday 13 January 2025

Ministerial Correction

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Employer National Insurance Contributions: Charities

The following extract is from the Westminster Hall debate on Employer National Insurance Contributions: Charities on 7 January 2025.

Seamus Logan: The Minister mentioned a number of mitigations for charities, and she said that she thinks that virtually all charities will benefit from those, so where are the Government actually obtaining the resources to fill the hole in the public finances?

Stephanie Peacock: I did not catch all of that intervention, but I said that half of charities would either stay the same or gain from the changes. I am happy to discuss that with the hon. Member after the debate, or write to him if I have misunderstood his point.

[Official Report, 7 January 2025; Vol. 759, c. 314WH.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock):

Stephanie Peacock: I did not catch all of that intervention, but I said that half of **employers, including charities with national insurance liabilities**, would either stay the same or gain from the changes. I am happy to discuss that with the hon. Member after the debate, or write to him if I have misunderstood his point.

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