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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 13 February 2025

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Electric Vehicles

1. **Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help support people to purchase electric vehicles. [902760]

7. **James Asser** (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help support people to use electric vehicles. [902766]

18. **Sarah Coombes** (West Bromwich) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help support people to use electric vehicles. [902781]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): The Government support zero emission vehicles through taxation incentives, vehicle grants and funding infrastructure roll-out. In January, EV sales were 42% higher than in January 2024. The recent National Audit Office report showed that we are on track to meet the 300,000 public charging points needed for expected demand in 2030.

Perran Moon: Meur ras ha myttin da, Mr Speaker. Electric vehicle demand is increasing. The Government's commitment to banning the sale of new petrol and diesel vehicles by 2030 will have a significant impact on UK emissions, but there remain many misunderstandings and myths about electric vehicles. They are safer and cleaner, and whole-life costs are significantly cheaper. What can the Government do to increase consumer confidence by dispelling some of the nonsense peddled by vested interests?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend's expertise in the field is welcome. Showcasing the benefits of EV ownership and the growth of the public charging point network are vital to supporting the transition away from diesel and petrol-powered cars. As he will know, EV drivers can save hundreds of pounds a year, and the average range of a new EV is now 236 miles. That is about two weeks' driving for most people, and of course it is

cleaner and greener. We are working closely with industry stakeholders to promote positive messaging around EVs and to improve consumer confidence.

James Asser: One of the challenges facing people who are moving to electric vehicles is the charging infrastructure, particularly in inner cities. Local authorities have worked to try to help that, but they have limited resources. My old team at Newham council did a deal with Uber to supply 400 on-street charging units. Does the Minister agree that that sort of partnership using public sector actors with private finance could help resolve the issue? Could the Government look at ways they could work with local authorities to secure those public-private partnerships?

Lilian Greenwood: It is great to hear about Newham council's partnership that was developed under my hon. Friend's leadership. The £381 million local EV infrastructure fund does just as he suggests, and is expected to deliver 100,000 charging points across the country, supporting those drivers without off-street parking to switch to electric vehicles.

Sarah Coombes: The future of the car industry is important to West Brom, and that future lies in electric vehicles. One of the key issues on the demand side is that consumers do not have enough confidence in second-hand EVs, despite manufacturer warranties and increasingly good battery life. What steps are the Government taking to improve consumer confidence when buying second-hand EVs?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that one in three used electric cars are now under £20,000, and data suggests that owners should expect an EV to last just as long as an internal combustion engine car. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe has developed a new global technical regulation, which would set standards for the lifespan of an EV battery and its minimum durability. We are analysing options for the implementation of such regulations in the UK.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): What the Minister says is all very well, but why do the Government not support my Exemption from Value Added Tax (Public Electric Vehicle Charging Points) Bill?

Lilian Greenwood: As the hon. Member knows, matters relating to taxation are for the Treasury rather than the Department for Transport, but I am sure that the Chancellor will be looking at the proposals that he brings forward.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I welcome the increased uptake of electric vehicles. Indeed we do still need to dispel many myths. In my constituency, charging infrastructure is still a big issue, and the distribution networks struggle to speed up connecting to the infrastructure that is needed. Will the Minister outline what work she will do with distribution networks to increase the expansion of EV charging networks?

Lilian Greenwood: As I am sure the hon. Member knows, there has been a rapid increase in the roll-out of electric charging points—it was up by more than 40% last year. However, she is absolutely right that in some cases

that roll-out is difficult, because it is held back by the availability of capacity on the network. That is precisely why we are working across Government, including with my colleagues in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, to unblock those things, so that we can ensure that everyone can access the electric vehicle charging points that they need close to home.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her answers. I am not a petrolhead, but I do love my diesel vehicle. Those of us who live in the countryside understand that having a diesel vehicle is incredibly important, and there are no electric charging points across the rural countryside. There need to be more of those charging points on the high street and in the shopping centres, and there definitely need to be more of them in the countryside, since those of us who live there are being disadvantaged by the electric car process as it goes forward. What is being done to help the rural community—those of us who live in the countryside and those of us who represent them—take advantage of electric cars as well? The charging points are not there; the system does not work.

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. Gentleman has already been charged.

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Member makes an important point: we need to ensure that there is access everywhere across our nation to electric vehicle charging points. In the autumn Budget, we committed £200 million to supporting the roll-out of charging infrastructure, which is bolstered by over £6 billion in private investment that has been committed up to 2030. The hon. Member will be pleased to hear that there are over 73,000 public charging points in the UK, over 20,000 have been added in the past year, and there has been a 45% increase in rural charging points over the past year.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Last year, just one in 10 consumers buying a new car chose battery electric, and in 2024, the private market for battery electric was 20% lower than Government intervention had tried to manipulate it to be. Without fleet sales—which we know are warped by huge tax incentives, promoting them over practical vehicle choices—electric car demand just is not there. When will the Minister understand that people are crying out for a different way to defossilise and decarbonise their private vehicles? Battery electric just is not popular, so when will the Government stop trying to tell people what they should want? This is just a “Government knows best” attitude at its very worst, is it not?

Lilian Greenwood: What an absolutely astonishing intervention by the shadow Minister. It was his Government who introduced the zero emission vehicle mandate, and we are not proposing to change the trajectory that they introduced. I would gently remind him that many fleet vehicles are in fact private vehicles, as people choose to lease their vehicles or access them through a salary

sacrifice scheme. Last year, the UK was the largest market in Europe—in fact, in the world—for EV vehicles.¹ He is talking nonsense.

Greg Smith: The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders' January report simply does not back up what the Minister has just said. I repeat that only one in 10 consumers—the people we all represent in this House—actively chose a battery electric vehicle. As the Minister knows from her time on the Transport Select Committee when we looked at the future of fuel, there are other technologies out there. The Government like to say that they are technology-neutral, but the ZEV mandate's myopic focus on the tailpipe rather than whole system analysis effectively denies our innovators the room to defossilise and decarbonise in a manner that consumers want. Surely the Minister sees that, so instead of trying to force people to buy battery electric, will the Government just get the bureaucracy out of the way and let our innovators innovate?

Lilian Greenwood: I wonder whether the shadow Minister has actually met any vehicle manufacturers. If he had, he would know that they are investing incredibly heavily in the switch to battery electric vehicles. I and my ministerial colleagues have met manufacturers representing 95% of the UK car market to understand their concerns, and we will be working with them to ensure we support all UK vehicle manufacturers, who have—as they would put it—bet the house on the transition to electric vehicles.

Local Road Condition

2. **Emma Foody** (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the condition of local roads. [902761]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): We have empowered local councils to tackle the highway maintenance backlog, which is the result of a decade of under-investment by the previous Government. We have made an immediate start by providing an extra £500 million next year, representing an increase of nearly 40% for most councils. We will end the pothole plague on our roads and ensure safer journeys for everyone.

Emma Foody: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. I recently met the roads Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood)—and National Highways about the need for investment in Seaton Burn and Moor Farm roundabouts. Those critical pieces of infrastructure are already struggling with capacity and congestion. The local councils and the North East combined authority have all highlighted the fact that upgrades will be crucial for growth in the north-east. Will the Secretary of State consider how this Government could support the project, and whether the scheme can test a new form of transport business case for projects intended to deliver growth in all of our regions?

Heidi Alexander: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. I know she is a committed advocate for improvements to the road network in the north-east. I recognise the importance of Moor Farm and Seaton Burn roundabouts to her local area, and I assure her that both are being considered as part of a pipeline of projects for our future road investment strategy.

1. [Official Report, 24 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 10WC.] (Correction)

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): A recent freedom of information request revealed that, of identified highways spending across the Bradford district by Bradford council over the past six years, £49 million was spent within Bradford city itself, but only £4 million was spent in Keighley and my wider constituency, despite streets such as Elliott Street in Silsden being in a very poor state of repair. Will the Secretary of State write to leaders at Bradford council and remind them that highways spending needs to be spent equally across the whole Bradford district, including places such as Keighley and Ilkley, and not just within Bradford city centre?

Heidi Alexander: I am not the sort of Secretary of State who would sit at my desk in Whitehall and instruct local authorities to spend certain amounts of money on certain roads. I expect local authorities to take strategic decisions based on where the investment is needed, and I will leave it to local leaders to make those decisions.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): Too many of Britain's roads are in a shocking state of disrepair, as the Secretary of State says. In my constituency, Labour-run Merton council has the worst roads in London and the second worst in the country. Some 40% of our local roads are rated as poor by her Department. Although I welcome the coming year's increase in funding, that is only a short-term measure and not based on need; Merton and others have received less than authorities whose roads are in a better condition. As Labour-run Merton has failed to maintain its roads and has not been bailed out by its friends in the Government, will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss what action can be taken?

Heidi Alexander: I would be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to ensure that roads in his constituency and across London are maintained to an adequate standard. The increase of £500 million in this year's allocation to highways maintenance represents an average 40% increase for local authorities. It will be making the difference, and I would be happy to discuss this issue with him further.

Local Bus Services

3. **Sam Rushworth** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve local bus services.
[902762]

13. **Michael Wheeler** (Worsley and Eccles) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve local bus services.
[902774]

17. **Jade Botterill** (Ossett and Denby Dale) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve local bus services.
[902779]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): The Government are committed to delivering the better, more reliable bus services that passengers deserve. We have already made significant progress by introducing the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill to help local leaders get the powers they need, and by announcing investment of over £1 billion to support and improve bus services.

Sam Rushworth: I thank the Minister for that answer. The cost of transport is a huge cost of living pressure for children and young people in my constituency who are trying to access education and social and leisure opportunities. What assurance can the Minister give me that the buses Bill will end a system in which bus services are controlled by ideology, and make it a system that puts them at the service of local people?

Simon Lightwood: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The Government know how important local bus services are in providing access to education and allowing young people to get around. Empowering local leaders to improve services is at the heart of our reforms, including through the introduction of the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill, so that bus services deliver for hard-working families and communities throughout the country.

Michael Wheeler: My constituents in Worsley and Eccles face high levels of congestion on our roads, especially during their rush-hour commute. We benefit from Greater Manchester's Bee network, but it only takes a temporary set of traffic lights, roadworks or an accident to back things up. Will the Minister outline what steps are being taken to give the necessary powers and encouragement to our local communities and decision makers to create joined-up public and private transport networks that will alleviate congestion?

Simon Lightwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight this issue and will know that this Government are acting quickly to respond to his concerns. As outlined in the "English Devolution" White Paper, we will empower strategic authorities to play a greater role in co-ordinating their local road networks. That includes removing unnecessary Secretary of State consent requirements for certain local highway decisions, potentially including lane rental schemes, which will speed up decision making.

Jade Botterill: So many people who live in rural towns across my constituency rely on bus services to go to work, school and hospital appointments, but too often buses are running late or never turn up at all. Last week I met local resident Nicola from Emley who told me that when she was unable to drive it was nearly impossible for her daughter Olivia to attend after-school clubs. Will the Minister advise me on how this Government will hold failing bus companies to account and will help improve services in our local areas?

Simon Lightwood: My hon. Friend is my constituency neighbour and I understand the challenges her constituents face. We know that local bus services are not currently delivering for people around the country. We are committed to changing that, and our bus services Bill will give local leaders the tools they need to deliver reliable bus services that truly meet the needs of local communities, including in rural areas.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): I know that the Minister is a truly passionate advocate for bus services, but if he were privileged enough to live in the beautiful village of Hixon in my constituency and wanted to get to the surgery in Great Haywood, he would have to travel into Stafford on a bus and then on a bus from Stafford to Great Haywood. Will he update the House on what

additional help and support Staffordshire county council might look forward to receiving so that Hixon residents are able to get directly to Great Hayward?

Simon Lightwood: The Government are determined to empower local leaders to make decisions about their local bus services. They can choose from a variety of options in that toolkit, including franchising, which is now open to all local transport authorities. We are lifting the ban on municipal bus companies and improving enhanced partnerships. It is for local leaders to make those decisions, and we are empowering them to do so.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): Rural communities such as mine rely on bus services as a vital lifeline, but too often these services are limited and infrequent. Private operators dominate the market in my area, yet there is no minimum service requirement to ensure that people can get to work, school or medical appointments. Will the Government guarantee a minimum level of service so that rural communities are not left stranded?

Simon Lightwood: The hon. Member will be pleased to know that the bus services Bill includes the socially necessary local services measure. Under the new measure, local transport authorities operating under an enhanced partnership will need to identify local services which they consider socially necessary and put in place requirements that must be followed before such services can be changed or cancelled. They will also need to consider the alternative options that are available.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Last week I held a two-hour question and answer session with Disability Action Yorkshire. One issue that came up was the inability of disabled people to use their bus passes before 9 o'clock, limiting them in getting to work, accessing leisure opportunities or seeing family and friends. Does the Minister agree that one of the best ways to improve local bus access would be to allow disabled people to use their passes before 9 o'clock?

Simon Lightwood: The Government already invest £700 million in the national concessionary travel scheme in order to fund those bus passes, and at the last Budget we announced over £1 billion of funding to support buses. We changed the formula for BSIP—bus service improvement plans—away from the competitive “Hunger Games” style contests under the previous Government. The hon. Member’s local area will have received funding and it is able to use that funding to go above and beyond what is set on a national level.

Open Access Railway Services

4. Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): What steps she is taking to maintain open access railway services. [902763]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): Open access operators will continue to have a place in our reformed Great British railways. We have supported new proposals from Wrexham, Shropshire and Midlands Railway, and existing track access rights will be honoured. Open access can provide benefits, but it must not come at the cost of better services for passengers and better value for taxpayers.

Wendy Morton: In her recent letter to the Office of Rail and Road, the Transport Secretary appeared to push against open access agreements, yet last week, as she has mentioned today, the Government signalled their intention to support the request to license the Wrexham to London Euston line, which will come through Aldridge in my constituency. Will the Transport Secretary clarify her position on the Wrexham to Euston line, particularly in regard to the inclusion of Aldridge train station? As she will be aware, thanks to the Labour mayor, the funding for that station has been raided and put into his pet projects.

Heidi Alexander: I appreciate the right hon. Lady’s commitment to making the case for a new station at Aldridge, but I gently point out to her that in the 14 years of her party’s Government, including her own stint in the Department for Transport, the station failed to materialise. The West Midlands combined authority has had to prioritise the delivery of schemes that are in construction. That seems to me to be a reasonable approach, but I appreciate that she will continue to make the case for her own station.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): Open access operator Grand Central already runs five services daily from Sunderland to London King’s Cross through my constituency, but unfortunately they currently do not stop. My constituents have endured years of poor rail services from Northern Rail, with just one overcrowded two-carriage train an hour, which is often cancelled or delayed. While I welcome this Government’s investment in 450 new trains for Northern Rail, we need some immediate solutions. Will the Minister urge the ORR to approve the application from Grand Central to allow these trains to stop at stations in my Easington constituency?

Heidi Alexander: Open access operators currently account for 1% of our railways, and they do not always have the same public service obligations as other train operating companies. We have always supported open access operators where they genuinely add value and do not divert revenue away from existing operators, all of which are supported by the taxpayer in some form. I would add that we need to make best use of constrained capacity on the rail network. Ensuring that the railway can recover from problems on the railways is also important to me.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Talking of access, several years ago, Greater Anglia demolished half of Wickford station to extend some of the platforms. However, after nearly three years of endless excuses, missed deadlines and, frankly, broken promises, it still has not rebuilt it. I regret to say that I have lost all confidence in the senior management of Greater Anglia. If they told me today was a Thursday, I would double-check it. Can I go over their head and ask the Secretary of State for a personal meeting with the Rail Minister so that we can finally get Wickford station rebuilt, despite Greater Anglia, rather than because of it?

Heidi Alexander: I will happily ask the Rail Minister to meet the right hon. Gentleman to ensure that progress can be made at Wickford.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I know that my right hon. Friend will be delighted by the news that Go-op will be operating a new mandate for return

services between Swindon and Taunton. Does she agree that this demonstrates the Government's commitment to improving connectivity across the country? Can we hope for such improvements to connectivity in my little corner of the world in Berkshire?

Heidi Alexander: I am pleased that my hon. Friend has raised this proposal, which demonstrates the pragmatic approach we take to open access operators. Go-op will be the first co-operatively owned train service running anywhere in the UK. If there are any investors out there thinking about investing in that service, I encourage them to look closely at it.

Rolling Stock: Purchasing Models

6. **Graham Leadbitter** (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the potential merits of using alternative funding models to purchase rolling stock. [902765]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): As part of our reforms to the railway, we have set out that we will continue to lease rolling stock when we take contracts into public ownership, but we will apply a single directing mind approach to eliminate barriers to sharing rolling stock better across the network. We will consider the best funding and financing structures for future orders and contracts in partnership with private capital.

Graham Leadbitter: At the moment, the rolling stock leasing companies take more than £1 billion of profit out of the railway. A substantial amount of that could be reinvested in improving the railway network. With the Bill for Great British Railways due to come to Parliament soon, will the Secretary of State look seriously at alternative financing models such as EUROFIMA—the European company for the financing of railroad rolling stock—or even a publicly owned ROSCO that could deliver rolling stock at a considerably lower price? Indeed, will she be more socialist and more ambitious with the Bill?

Heidi Alexander: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I do not lack any ambition when it comes to Great British Railways. It would cost billions in taxpayers' money to buy existing rolling stock, at a time when there are many pressures on the public purse. My officials have been engaging regularly with EUROFIMA to consider the potential for UK membership and how EUROFIMA finance could be deployed in the UK.

East Coast Main Line

8. **Tracy Gilbert** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to improve reliability on the east coast main line. [902767]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): The Department recognises the critical importance of the east coast main line and has invested £4 billion in a combination of infrastructure enhancements and rolling stock upgrades that will help to deliver journey time, reliability and capacity improvements. The full benefit of this investment will be felt with the introduction of a revised timetable in December 2025.

The Department continues to work closely with Network Rail to explore opportunities to improve performance and resilience.

Tracy Gilbert: My constituents have raised concerns about the reliability of services on the east coast main line, with one constituent receiving delay repay compensation for five out of six journeys he took over a two-month period. I welcome the correspondence I have had with the Rail Minister on the action that the Department for Transport is taking with rail partners, including through the east coast digital programme. Will my hon. Friend confirm that the first trains utilising new digital signalling technology will be on the tracks by the end of the year? When does she expect passengers to feel the full benefit of this welcome upgrade?

Lilian Greenwood: The east coast digital programme is delivering digital signalling on 100 miles of the east coast main line. The technology will deliver an inherent improvement to service reliability and uplift performance and capacity across the line, including for my hon. Friend's constituents. The first trains are forecast to start running under digital signalling from early 2026. The number of services running under digital signalling will increase until the full programme is expected to be complete in the early 2030s.

Cost of Rail Services

9. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What steps she is taking to reduce the cost of rail services. [902768]

21. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): What steps she is taking to reduce the cost of rail services. [902784]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): It is our ambition through public ownership to deliver a more affordable railway. This year's fare increase of 4.6% is the lowest absolute increase in three years. We are committed to reforming the overcomplicated fares system and expanding ticketing innovations like pay-as-you-go in urban areas across the country.

Sir Edward Leigh: When the Secretary of State finally steps in and knocks heads together and we get our Azuma train to Grimsby via Market Rasen, will she instruct the railway company to name the locomotive Margaret Thatcher to remind us all that the best way to reduce the cost of rail services is to end restrictive trade union practices?

Heidi Alexander: I hate to disappoint the Father of the House, but I am afraid that I will not be making such a commitment today.

Andrew Rosindell: The British people pay some of the highest rail fares in Europe. However, the Government seem to prioritise the size of the socialist state, by kowtowing to trade unions with radical public pay rises and nationalisation plans. Will the Secretary of State instead please focus on improving the lot of commuters—particularly Romford's hard-working commuters—and take real steps to reduce rail fares and improve railway services?

Heidi Alexander: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman has the gall to raise this issue when, under his party's Government, fares rose at around twice the speed of wages. I also point out that since 2020, train operating companies have paid out nearly £1 billion to their parent companies, signed off by Conservative Ministers in the previous Government. If the hon. Gentleman wants to talk about costs and value for money on the railway, I suggest he start by looking in the mirror.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): It was, in fact, a Conservative Secretary of State who forced fare rises on Transport for London in exchange for covid emergency funding. What steps will my right hon. Friend take to put TfL on a better footing in the future, including backing great projects such as the one in my constituency to upgrade and provide step-free access at one of the busiest stations in the country at South Kensington?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: in the middle of a global pandemic, the Conservatives were still obsessed with settling old political scores over fares in London, rather than doing right by the capital. I vividly remember a meeting with the then Secretary of State to discuss how we could keep services safely running, which ended with him telling me, "This would have been so much easier if you hadn't frozen fares." Unlike the Conservatives, this Government will always do right by the capital, as well as the rest of the country.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): Can I ask that this UK Government do not follow the approach taken by the Scottish Government on public ownership? ScotRail fares are set for another inflation-busting increase in April, following an 8.7% hike last year and the reintroduction of peak fares in September. Does the Secretary of State agree that the SNP should be making rail more affordable, instead of hitting passengers with painful fare hikes time and again? The increases are bad for Scotland's rail passengers, bad for our economy and bad for the environment.

Heidi Alexander: I assure my hon. Friend that we will bring the train operating companies into public ownership properly, and that we will not repeat the mistakes we have seen in Scotland.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): I am very interested by that last answer, because the Government do think that nationalisation will reduce the cost of rail travel. What lessons has the Secretary of State learned from the SNP's nationalisation of ScotRail?

Heidi Alexander: We will be increasing value for money in the way we operate our railways. To start off with, we will be getting rid of up to £100 million a year in management fees that we are currently paying out of the public purse to the train operating companies. We are determined to drive up performance on our railways and give better value for money to the taxpayer.

Jerome Mayhew: The latest experiment in nationalisation has shown in just two years that state inefficiency has pushed up costs—not reduced them—by £600 million,

forcing fares to rise, alongside an increase in delays, a slump in customer satisfaction, and cuts, instead of improvements, to services. The data shows that in England, Greater Anglia has been the best performing operator, saving money for taxpayers while serving passengers with modern, punctual trains. The Secretary of State is about to launch a public consultation on nationalisation—one that has been as delayed as ScotRail trains. I am told that even the plan to publish it today has been further delayed, with the excuse of No. 10 on the line. If the Secretary of State consults, she has to be prepared to listen. Will she now listen to the deep concerns of the rail industry, and not just the ever-generous unions, and avoid another disastrous nationalisation?

Heidi Alexander: I assure the hon. Gentleman that the consultation on establishing Great British Railways is coming soon, and I look forward to discussing it further with him. I am confident that by bringing together the management of track and train, we can strip out duplication in our railways, provide better value for the taxpayer and ensure that trains are turning up on time, with reliable and punctual services. That is what we will deliver.

Transport Infrastructure: Rural Communities

10. Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to improve transport infrastructure in rural communities. [902769]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): The Government recognise the importance of high quality transport infrastructure as part of a well-functioning, integrated transport network. We are supporting all local authorities to improve transport infrastructure, including through our £1.6 billion investment in local roads. I know that my hon. Friend's roads are littered with potholes, which is why they are getting a share of our 50% uplift.

Ben Goldsborough: Norfolk's economy, to fire on all cylinders, needs a decent rural road network. The Thickthorn junction in my constituency is outdated and urgently needs upgrading to support growth and unlock new homes. Will the Minister back the project and visit to see at first hand why the Government should put Norfolk at the heart of our investment plans?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for the needs of his rural constituents. The central mission of this Government is to support economic growth, and this is one of a number of road investments under consideration. In the past week, we have approved upgrades to four major road projects across England. On the specific scheme, I hope to be able to say more in the coming weeks, and perhaps I will be visiting his constituency.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Sleaford has a beautiful grade II listed railway station in popular use. However, it is very difficult for those with disabilities to access the second platform because there is no lift. I have long campaigned for a lift, and I worked with East Midlands Railway, with the financial support of the previous Government, on a feasibility study for a lift that is in keeping with the

heritage station. Will this Government back access for my constituents and access for people to come and visit our beautiful town?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. Improving accessibility in our railways stations is incredibly important. I am sure that the Rail Minister will be happy to write to her on the specifics of her station and to consider the proposals that have been made.

Road Safety

11. **Olivia Bailey** (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve road safety. [902770]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): The last Labour Government halved the number of people killed on our roads each year. Under the Conservatives that progress stalled, with only a 12% reduction between 2010 and 2023, when almost 30,000 people were killed or seriously injured on our roads. That is about one casualty every 18 minutes. That shocking statistic is why improving road safety is one of my key priorities. We are developing our road safety strategy, the first in a decade, and will set out more details in due course.

Olivia Bailey: I thank the Minister for that answer. Nearly 400 of my constituents have filled in my survey about the dangerously short slip roads on the A34 at East Ilsley and Beedon. They include Nick, who never uses the Beedon junction when his young family are in the car and is even considering moving house because he believes it is a real risk to their lives. Will the Minister meet me and raise the issue of dangerous junctions with National Highways, so we can make them safe for local people?

Lilian Greenwood: I commend my hon. Friend for her support for safer roads. National Highways has undertaken several safety studies on sections of the A34. I am aware that improvement works took place on the East Ilsley slip in 2019, including work to widen, resurface and add new road markings. It continues to review concerns about safety on the road and is happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the issue further and plan a site visit. I will, of course, keep up to date with progress.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Bridgwater railway station has a bus stop that has remained unusable since its construction due to road layout and safety issues. Despite this being a relatively small fix, Somerset council has yet to take action. What additional support can the Government provide to ensure that buses can stop at the station safely and improve connectivity in my constituency?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that question. It does sound like it is a matter for his local council, but I am sure that my officials would be very happy to work with it to provide any advice and support it may need to work out how to provide a safer service in that area.

Rail Passengers

12. **Harpreet Uppal** (Huddersfield) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve passenger rail performance. [902771]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander):

Improving performance is a top priority for this Government as we establish Great British Railways. We regularly meet managing directors of train operating companies and their Network Rail counterparts to demand action to raise standards. Great British Railways will reunite the management of track and train, and will make joined-up, whole-system decisions that will improve performance for the benefit of passengers and taxpayers alike.

Harpreet Uppal: The TransPennine route upgrade is the biggest rail infrastructure project in the country, and my constituency is at the centre of it. One of the main benefits for passengers will be faster and more reliable trains. Will the Secretary of State update the House on the project, and tell us what steps are being taken to ensure that local communities such as those in Huddersfield benefit fully from improvements in rail performance?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the importance of this investment to her constituency. The rail upgrade will double the number of seats between Huddersfield and Manchester, and will increase the number by 30% between Huddersfield and Leeds. Service reliability will also improve. Moreover, 60% of the workforce will be employed within 25 miles of the route and 66% of spending will be within the local supply chain, which will lead to local growth and jobs—so it is good news all round.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I want to improve rail performance in my constituency, and the extension of the Borders Railway from Tweedbank to Hawick and Newcastleton and on to Carlisle has strong local and cross-party support. Has the UK Government's share of the funding for the feasibility study—secured as part of the Borderlands growth deal—been confirmed, and will it be released to Scottish Borders Council imminently?

Heidi Alexander: I understand that officials in my Department are speaking to Scottish colleagues, and I hope to be in a position to say more about that soon, potentially as part of the spending review.

Regional Airports

14. **Sarah Edwards** (Tamworth) (Lab): What discussions she is having with airlines to encourage the operation of flights from airports outside London and the south-east. [902776]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): This Government are committed to growth, which regional airports support by serving their local communities, creating jobs, and acting as gateways to international opportunities. Heathrow expansion could give more regions access to a bigger international network through their local airports, thus boosting productivity further.

Sarah Edwards: In my constituency, the largest sectoral employer is logistics. Tamworth sits within the “golden triangle” for distribution, centred around the European rail link. Within this hub is East Midlands airport, which handles approximately 440,000 tonnes of freight

each year, second only to Heathrow. What steps will the Minister take to fuel economic growth across the west midlands, reviewing capacity at our regional airports, including Birmingham?

Mike Kane: As my hon. Friend says, freight is hugely important for growth. That is why the Chancellor recently announced plans to build a new advanced manufacturing and logistics park at East Midlands airport, which will unlock up to £1 billion of investment and 2,000 jobs on the site.

Topical Questions

T1. [902750] **Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): We are getting on with delivering this Government's plan for change. Last week I approved upgrades to four major road projects across Wiltshire, Leeds, Essex and Buckinghamshire. That £90 million investment will reduce journey times, ease congestion and improve safety. It is on the back of drivers' switching to electric cars in record-breaking numbers, with sales in January more than 40% higher than those last year and nearly 20,000 public charge points added in 2024 alone. We are backing, with a £205 million investment, the west midlands metro extension, which will take trams from Wednesbury to Brierley Hill. We are cutting journey times and improving connections for towns with poor public transport links, and yesterday we announced a £300 million investment to get Britain walking and cycling, with hundreds of new footpaths and cycle lanes. We are delivering the basics of a better transport system, which means improving the everyday journeys that drive economic growth and make people's lives better.

Johanna Baxter: I met key Scottish stakeholders recently to discuss proposals to bring to the Glasgow city region a metro scheme interconnecting more and more parts of our region, including the towns and villages in my constituency. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is vital for the Scottish Government to show the same ambition for growth in Scotland as the UK Government have shown in their recent transport announcements, and will she work with the Scottish Government to ensure that this project maximises investment and opportunity for my constituents?

Heidi Alexander: I will always work closely with colleagues in the Scottish Government to ensure that this Government's ambitions for transport reach all corners of the UK. The Scottish Government have had a record settlement through the Budget, so I look forward to hearing more about plans for a greater Glasgow metro scheme as they develop.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): Heathrow airport is already the largest single-site payer of business rates in the country, paying approximately £124 million annually. To fund the Chancellor's next spending spree, the Valuation Office Agency is currently revaluating airports in England and Wales, and any significant increase could impact

Heathrow's ability to fund airport expansion and a third runway. Is the Secretary of State aware of the latest estimate of how much Heathrow's business rates will increase by?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): This was a policy cooked up by the Valuation Office Agency under His Majesty's Revenue and Customs by the last Government. We have engaged with airports on this matter and asked them to continue to engage with the Valuation Office Agency.

Gareth Bacon: I notice that the Minister did not answer my question, so I will assist him. The estimate is that Heathrow's rates bill will increase fivefold to £600 million annually, putting substantial additional pressure on Heathrow's finances. In the light of that, will the Minister confirm the long-standing policy that the full cost of a third runway, including related works such as relocating, tunnelling or bridging over the M25, will be fully funded by the private sector and not by the taxpayer?

Mike Kane: The airports national policy statement from 2018, which was two Governments ago, made it clear that any proposal—we have not had a proposal come forward—should treat surface access appropriately, and that should be funded by the private sector where possible.

T3. [902752] **John Whitby** (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): Residents in Ashbourne have been left feeling hopeless and frustrated after waiting decades for a relief road. More than 700 heavy goods vehicles pass through the town each day, endangering local pedestrians, increasing pollution and causing significant congestion. Will the Minister meet me regarding the need to install a relief road for Ashbourne?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lillian Greenwood): As my hon. Friend knows, delivering a transport system that meets local, regional and national needs will play a vital role in delivering the missions of this Government. I encourage him to continue to work with Derbyshire county council, which will hopefully be under new leadership in May, and with our excellent East Midlands Mayor, Claire Ward, to advocate for his constituents' priorities. I would, of course, be happy to meet him to discuss this.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): In her previous role as deputy London Mayor for transport, the Secretary of State stated she was "clear" in her opposition to a third runway at Heathrow. Is she still clear in her opposition, and if not, what has changed her mind?

Heidi Alexander: When I was deputy Mayor for transport in London, I was speaking in that capacity at that time, reflecting the views of the Mayor of London and City Hall on a previous Heathrow expansion scheme. As Secretary of State, I will consider any airport expansion proposals on their merits and in line with existing processes. Balancing economic growth and our environmental obligations is central to all my work in this role, and I will always act in the national interest, doing what is right for the country as a whole.

T6. [902756] **Jessica Toale** (Bournemouth West) (Lab): At least nine major roads in my constituency will be affected by roadworks in the next week. Seemingly endless utility works and roadworks are a crucial issue for my constituents, who have told me it makes them late for work, school pick-up and even hospital appointments. Can the Minister tell me what steps her Department is taking to improve the situation for my constituents?

Lilian Greenwood: This Government stand with local road users who are frustrated by roadworks that cause unnecessary disruption. While councils and utility companies should always work together to minimise the impact of their works, we are also taking action: we are doubling fixed penalty notices for utility companies that do not comply with certain requirements for carrying out their street works, and we have extended overrun charges of up to £10,000 per day to weekends and bank holidays, to prevent overrunning roadworks.

T4. [902753] **Charlie Dewhirst** (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): Open access operators such as Hull Trains offer excellent, cheap, unsubsidised inter-city services to locations across the north, so why are Ministers trying to block their expansion and stifle growth?

Heidi Alexander: There is a balance to be struck here. I welcome services such as those that run to Hull; they open up new routes and new connectivity. I have, however, asked the Office of Rail and Road to consider the balance in the revenue that they abstract from public operators, and to ensure that we are using constrained capacity in our network appropriately to deliver excellent services for passengers.

T8. [902758] **Linsey Farnsworth** (Amber Valley) (Lab): The RAC recently reported that potholes in Derbyshire are the worst in the country, but rather than welcoming over £75 million of funding for the east midlands, the Conservatives at Derbyshire county council claim that this is not new money and that it is bound up in red tape. Does the Minister agree that these are just more excuses, and that the Conservative-controlled Derbyshire county council should stop complaining and start fixing our roads?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The state of our roads is a daily reminder of Tory failure, which is why this Government have provided record funding to fix them. Derbyshire is getting its share of the extra £20 million going to the East Midlands combined authority. We expect the council to get on with the job and to tell local residents how it intends to use the extra taxpayers' money that it is getting.

Mr Speaker: I call Dave Doogan—not here.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): My constituent Kevin Stephenson and many other people in Hartlepool have complained about the shocking underperformance of Northern Rail. He has witnessed passengers being asked to wait in toilets in order to allow more people on to trains. Services are frequently cancelled, promises of additional carriages have not materialised, and residents are regularly left stranded at stations. Will the Minister work with me to fix the unacceptable level of service?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): Ministers and officials are in regular contact with Northern Rail. We recognise that its performance is totally unacceptable, and with the challenges that Northern Rail faces, it will take time to become a stable and reliable service. I would be absolutely delighted to work with my hon. Friend.

T7. [902757] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): As you will know, Mr Speaker, I rarely, if ever, agree with the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan. The Secretary of State has set out the position in relation to her change of heart, but will she commit to ensure that any proposal for a third runway at Heathrow will have a full impact assessment before it is approved or denied?

Heidi Alexander: I fully support the Chancellor's call for fresh proposals for Heathrow. Some of our airports in the south-east are running at or near capacity. We cannot pretend that that is not the case, and I am not prepared to be part of a Government who duck the difficult decisions. As the person who may ultimately be taking planning decisions on any application for a third runway at Heathrow, I will judge any scheme on its merits. We will update the airports national policy statement, and any expansion scheme must meet our legal and environmental obligations.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): As the Secretary of State knows, the south-west peninsula already contributes significantly to the UK economy, including through life sciences and climate tech. We are, however, held back from reaching our full potential by under-investment in transport connectivity, which is made worse by upcoming works at Old Oak Common and the continuing bottleneck on the A303. Will the Minister commit to developing a strategic investment plan to ensure that the south-west peninsula has the transport infrastructure it needs to unlock further growth?

Simon Lightwood: As I have said before, growth is the priority mission of this Government, and we are committed to empowering local leaders. A regional transport strategy, and a strategic investment plan for the south-west, has been developed by the sub-national transport body Peninsula Transport.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): As well as being home to both GCHQ and NATO's Allied Rapid Reaction Corps headquarters, Gloucestershire has the largest concentration of cyber-tech businesses and aerospace engineering firms outside London, but the county, and particularly Tewkesbury, is subject to slow, unreliable and grossly outdated rail services. It is also underserved by road transport links eastward. The Government recently announced that they will develop a silicon valley between Milton Keynes—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are on topicals—I think you need an Adjournment debate. Who is going to answer that?

Simon Lightwood: I will certainly meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss this matter.

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

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Department for Transport analysis carried out in 2017 showed that expanding Heathrow would displace 27,000 jobs from the UK regions to London by 2050, with 17 million fewer passengers using non-London airports. Does the Minister hope that the same analysis, if done now, would come to a different conclusion in order to ensure that UK economic growth really does benefit all UK regions and not just west London?

Mike Kane: The Government are committed to regional airports. I am proudly wearing my “Yes to R2” badge from when we built a second runway at Manchester airport in 2001. The position is quite the opposite of what my hon. Friend describes: under the 2018 airports national policy statement, the number of connections from Heathrow to regional airports was expected to increase if Heathrow expanded, increasing productivity in those regions.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Northern Trains runs one train per day on the Gainsborough-Brigg-Cleethorpes line. Does the Secretary of State agree that one train per day is pretty pointless? Will she arrange a meeting with the appropriate Minister for me and other affected MPs, so that we can discuss how to secure a better service?

Heidi Alexander: Reliable, frequent train services are important, no matter where in the country we live. I will ask the Rail Minister for a meeting.

Alison Taylor (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that achieving economic growth requires sustained investment in our transport infrastructure? Would she be willing to visit Glasgow International airport to learn more about how transport infrastructure can assist with the further development of the proposed investment zone in my constituency?

Simon Lightwood: I agree that investment in our transport infrastructure across the country is essential to our growth mission. I am aware of the investment zone bid involving Glasgow airport, and the aviation Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), would be delighted to visit in the near future.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I do not know whether the Secretary of State is aware that large swathes of British Airways flights between London and Scotland are automatically cancelled when there are serious weather or technical issues at Heathrow. British Airways says that if the Secretary of State's officials, the Civil Aviation Authority, Heathrow and airlines worked together, the number of cancellations could be minimised, even in those circumstances, so will she facilitate those discussions?

Mike Kane: The right hon. Member raises an important point. The resilience of the UK aviation sector is important, and key to its success, so we will facilitate any discussions to make sure we are always on an improvement trajectory.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Access for disabled people was a condition of opening up planning for the York Central development. However,

I hear that the condition will be bypassed, and that planning will go ahead without disabled access being put in place. That clearly impedes disabled people. Can we ensure that difficult engineering work is undertaken before planning permission is granted?

Simon Lightwood: The accessibility of all modes of transport is extremely important to this Government. I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this matter further.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): Despite my constituency being only a stone's throw from Heathrow, we have no direct rail link to the country's busiest airport. Last week, Heathrow Southern Railway submitted a business case to the Government. When will the Government consider it, to ensure that my constituents can get a train to Heathrow?

Heidi Alexander: Alongside the question of how many planes should take off and land at Heathrow, there is the critical question of how people get to the airport. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and I would be happy to discuss it further with him.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): Learner drivers in Basingstoke have been left stranded for months—in some cases, years—unable to book a driving test. That is affecting their jobs, their education and the local economy. Does the Secretary of State agree that urgent action is needed to extend test centre hours, to ramp up the recruitment of examiners, and to clamp down on the rip-off companies that book multiple slots, only to flog them at higher prices?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is right to raise these concerns on behalf of learner drivers. On 18 December, the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency set out a seven-point plan that recognises the need to fix the driving test booking system, so that we can get new drivers on the road. I will hold it to account for delivery of that plan and the changes that my hon. Friend and his constituents need to see.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): When the previous Government cancelled High Speed 2, they promised more than £4 billion for projects in the north and the midlands. Do the Government still plan to deliver on that, and when should we expect to see that money in the north?

Heidi Alexander: I hate to tell the hon. Gentleman this, but that was fantasy money. We are working through a pipeline of transport infrastructure projects, and will make announcements alongside the spending review.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): The long-promised platform 1 lift at Hertford North station, due to be delivered under the Access for All scheme, has been delayed yet again. This leaves some of my disabled constituents having to travel back up the line to get a different train to platform 2, so that they can use the lift there. Will the appropriate Minister meet me to discuss how we can urgently drive forward the lift project for my constituents?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise concerns about disabled access at his local station. We want to ensure that everyone can access our public transport networks, and I would be happy to ensure that I or one of my colleagues met him.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): On economic growth, which we have discussed, will the Secretary of State clarify, for the benefit of the Conservative party, that economic growth depends on rather more than a well-oiled revolving door between the Tory party and big business—a door through which a former Tory Transport Minister and Member of the other place unsuccessfully attempted to walk last week?

Heidi Alexander: Delivering economic growth requires a proper plan for investment in our transport infrastructure. That is exactly what this Government are determined to deliver.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): Once Birmingham's Camp Hill line reopens, we will need track investment if we are to restore the pre-pandemic service frequencies on the cross-city line, including to Northfield and Longbridge. Will the Minister look fully at the case for upgrading King's Norton station?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is an assiduous and informed campaigner for improved rail services for his constituents. He will know that funding for the midlands rail hub includes funding for designs for reinstated island platforms at King's Norton. Decisions

still need to be taken on future investment, but I know that he will push for construction to start as soon as possible.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): The Calder Valley line was listed as a top priority for improvements by Transport for the North's electrification taskforce 10 years ago, back in 2015, yet my constituents are still waiting for those improvements. Will the Minister commit this Government to delivering the infrastructure for my constituents that the last Government could not?

Heidi Alexander: Network Rail is completing a strategic outline business case, covering electrification of the Calder Valley line. The business case will be considered in the context of the wider electrification strategy, so that we can determine how to deliver the best possible benefits across the region.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Next month, railway enthusiasts from around the world will come to my constituency, where we will mark the 200th anniversary of the Stockton and Darlington railway, which took off from the town of Shildon. Will my right hon. Friend ask the Rail Minister to meet me and other MPs along that route to talk about how the Government can be part of those celebrations?

Heidi Alexander: I am sure that is an invitation that the Rail Minister could not possibly refuse.

Mr Speaker: On that basis, I look forward to a Minister opening the Coppull railway station, or at least doing an impact study on the main line.

Ukraine

10.38 pm

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on Ukraine.

The Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry (Maria Eagle): Yesterday, at the Ukraine Defence Contact Group, chaired by the Defence Secretary, we saw almost 50 nations and partners standing together. Ukraine is backed by the members of the group, and by billions of dollars-worth of arms and ammunition that have been committed to keep its warfighters equipped. That will increase pressure on Putin, help force him to the table, and bring a sustainable peace closer.

We were pleased that Secretary Hegseth confirmed the US's continued commitment to the group, to Ukraine's pursuit of what he called "a durable peace", and to the importance of security guarantees. We heard his call for European nations to step up; we are, and we will. NATO allies pledged €40 billion in 2024, and went on to provide €50 billion. The majority of that came from European nations, while non-US NATO allies boosted wider defence spending by 20% in just the last year, so Europe is stepping up.

Finally, we saw a clear commitment to ratcheting up the pressure on Putin, using both military and economic tools. We all agree that 2025 will be the critical year for Ukraine. At this crucial moment, we will not step back, but step up our support for Ukraine. President Trump and President Zelensky have both spoken of their desire to achieve "peace through strength". The commitments made yesterday provide the collective strength that we need to achieve peace. For our part, the UK will spend £4.5 billion on military support for Ukraine this year, which is more than ever before.

We have now provided more than 500,000 artillery shells, worth over £1.5 billion. Yesterday, the Defence Secretary announced that we will provide an additional £150 million of new firepower, including drones, tanks and air-to-air missiles. Ukraine's security matters to global security. That is why the vital Ukraine Defence Contact Group coalition of 50 nations and partners stretches from the Indo-Pacific to South America. This war was never about the fate of just one nation. When the border of one country is redrawn by force, it undermines the security of all nations.

The US is serious about stability in the Indo-Pacific, as are we. That is why the Prime Minister announced that the carrier strike group will go there next year. If aggression goes unchecked on one continent, it emboldens regimes on another, so on stepping up for Ukraine, we are, and we will. On stepping up for European security, we are, and we will.

James Cartledge: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question; we are in recess next week, and the day that we return will be the third anniversary of Putin's unprovoked illegal invasion of Ukraine. In the past three years, Russia has inflicted unimaginable suffering on Ukraine. There has been military and civilian loss of life on a vast scale, at the hands of a dictator oblivious to consequences and only too willing to sacrifice his own soldiers to the meat grinder.

In the face of so many casualties and so much pain, of course we all want peace. We all want the senseless slaughter to stop, and for Ukraine to once again thrive and enjoy the trappings of peace and prosperity, which we all take for granted. It is clear that an end to this suffering is a goal that President Trump wishes to achieve rapidly; he set that out to the American people before securing their support for his election to the White House, and for a second mandate.

We remain 100% steadfast in our support for Ukraine, and in our backing for the Government in delivering that; they gave us the same backing when in opposition. We agree in principle with them and believe, as we stressed repeatedly in government, that it is for the Ukrainians to decide the timing and the terms of any negotiations on ending the war. Does the Minister agree that negotiations without the direct involvement of Ukraine would be unthinkable? What more can the Minister say about how the Government will work with allies to ensure that any negotiations are driven by the primacy of Ukraine's needs, not least given its status as the democratic nation invaded, without provocation, by a dictator?

We welcome the news from the Minister about the commitments given by other European NATO nations this week, but is not President Trump right to consistently highlight the point that some NATO nations spend far below what is expected and required on defence? Will the Minister assure the House that the Government, using every lever at their disposal, will remind all NATO members that a win for Putin in any settlement may bring a temporary end to the conflict, but will not make the world a safer place? Far from it. It would be an illusion of peace, and would be likely to send a very dangerous signal to other potential adversaries.

Of course, the position expressed by both the US President and his Defence Secretary yesterday has huge implications for our defence policy. They have made it abundantly clear that the US will play no role in any future peacekeeping effort in Ukraine, should that be necessary. Although the Government will of course be cautious about contemplating publicly the implications of that, is not the key point straightforward: if higher defence spending was urgent before, it is now critical?

Maria Eagle: I welcome the fact that, in the main, there is still consensus across this House on supporting Ukraine. That has been a tremendously important part of the support that we have given over the last three years, and before, to the Ukrainians.

The hon. Gentleman said that there should be no negotiation about Ukraine without Ukraine; my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary made that clear in his remarks yesterday. NATO's job is to put Ukraine in the strongest possible position for any talks, but there can be no negotiation about Ukraine without Ukraine's involvement. We want to see a durable peace and no return to conflict and aggression. That is the only way in which this war can end, with the kind of security that President Trump and Secretary Hegseth have referred to.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): We are all conscious of the three-year anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine, and our thoughts are with the people of Ukraine at this time. However, there can be no peace without justice. It is therefore welcome that countries are collaborating to try to bring about a de-escalation

of the war. What are the Government doing to focus on the justice system, to ensure that war criminals are tried, and justice is brought to the Ukrainian people?

Maria Eagle: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We have always said that this has to be a just peace, and that those who have committed war crimes during the invasion of Ukraine need to be pursued for them.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): Yesterday, the leader of my party warned the Prime Minister that we might be facing the worst betrayal of a European ally since Poland in 1945. The hours since have confirmed our fears. This is a moment of great peril for us all. Does the Minister agree that the US's actions are a betrayal of our Ukrainian friends, who have fought so hard for their freedom, of the UK, and of all our European allies? Will the Government step up and show British leadership, starting by passing urgent legislation to seize frozen Russian assets, so that we can support Ukraine whatever the US does? Clearly, in the light of the events of the past 24 hours, the Government need to look again at defence spending. Does she agree that the decision of the previous Government to continue with a cut to the Army of 10,000 troops at a time when war is raging on our continent now looks utterly unforgivable?

Maria Eagle: I do not accept what the hon. Gentleman says about being betrayed by our allies. The US Defence Secretary has made it clear that he that he wants a durable peace. That is what he and the President are proceeding to try to obtain, so I do not accept that point. In terms of our own forces, we are seeking to ensure that recruitment, which has failed to meet targets over the last number of years, is improved, so that the numbers in our armed forces are up to full strength.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement and the additional support that the Government have announced. It is essential that the UK supports Ukraine, and that the annual £3 billion pledge continues. Does she agree that working alongside our allies is even more essential in these turbulent times to bring about an end to the war?

Maria Eagle: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is clear that any such negotiations must involve Ukraine, and that the Ukrainians must be happy with the peace that is negotiated. Our role at present, while fierce fighting is still going on, is to put them in the strongest position that we can, in order to enable them properly to negotiate.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): I welcome what the Minister has said from the Dispatch Box. Does she agree that in this new world, and in the event of any peace deal, the United Kingdom and its European allies must lead in providing Ukraine with military support and, potentially, military presence across land, air and sea, to give Ukraine confidence that any peace will endure? I assure the Government that they will have my support, if that is what they decide to do.

Maria Eagle: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks. Of course, when he played a part in these matters he was in office, so he is very knowledgeable

about them. I can confirm that we aim to put Ukraine in the strongest possible position to enable it to negotiate. That involves continuing to supply the Ukrainians with the arms and weapons that they need in order to fight, because the fighting is still fierce. We need to step up and ensure that we do that. Certainly over the last period, the EU and European nations that are involved in the coalition to support Ukraine have given the majority of military aid and support. As the Secretary-General of NATO confirmed yesterday, 58% of the support that Ukraine received last year was from European nations, so European nations are stepping up. We must continue to do so.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's comments about Ukraine's security being indivisible from global security. Does she agree that the UK must stand firm against those who believe that they can take land through aggression, and that we must continue to send a strong signal around the world that larger nations cannot just grab bits of smaller nations as and when they please?

Maria Eagle: My hon. Friend is correct. As I said in my initial response to the urgent question, it is important that we deter that kind of behaviour wherever it is seen around the world.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): It is quite clear from events of the past few hours that the Atlantic and the high north are of increasingly critical concern. Indeed, I was a member of the Scottish Affairs Committee that considered that in the previous Parliament. I know that the Government have had conversations with Denmark, but what conversations are they having with our other Joint Expeditionary Force partners to ensure that those forces are given the support and the resources that they need?

Maria Eagle: The Government have ongoing discussions with our partners in Europe and the high north.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that this announcement should not affect the support of this House and the UK for Ukraine, and will she work with our armed forces and our defence industries to do everything possible to support Ukrainian forces on the frontline?

Maria Eagle: My hon. Friend is correct. We are doing that, but we must continue to step up our capacity to support Ukraine with weapons and the force that it needs to deter ongoing aggression, and to ensure that it is in the strongest possible position in any negotiations that it decides to enter.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will the Government impress on President Trump at every possible opportunity that the reason why appeasement led to world war two was that it left a vacuum in Europe, whereas the reason why the occupation of eastern Europe at the end of that war did not lead to world war three was that the United States filled any possible vacuum and contained further aggression? If he is going for a settlement against the wishes of the Ukrainian people, the least he can do is guarantee directly the security of that part of Ukraine which remains unoccupied.

Maria Eagle: No matter which side of the Chamber he is sitting on, the right hon. Gentleman has a long history of supporting deterrence—whether nuclear or short of that threshold—and he makes the same point again. The US Secretary of Defence made it clear in his remarks to the contact group that deterrence is important around the world, so I think there is agreement there.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): I welcome the announcement of the new £150 million package of military firepower for Ukraine, including drones, tanks and air defence systems. How will that boost Ukrainian resilience and the UK defence sector?

Maria Eagle: It does both. There is only one way in which we can provide the Ukrainians with increasing amounts of munitions and drones, which are developing and changing rapidly, and that is by boosting the strength of our defence industries. That has the additional importance of enabling us to boost our capacity to deter any potential aggression, so in that sense we can do both, and we are doing so.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Viewed from Washington, the idea of carving up the map in Europe might look like a pragmatic deal, even if history tells us that that always ends badly. Surely we in Europe understand that no matter what we give Vladimir Putin, he will always want more. Is that the context in which the strategic defence review is being carried out, and does the Minister accept that this moment requires a fundamental reset of our relations with our European partners—not just in defence—and that we need to get real about the financial and economic implications?

Maria Eagle: I assure the right hon. Gentleman that the strategic defence review is about identifying threats that we face now, rather than threats we perhaps faced before the Ukraine war began, so I can tell him that the review is being conducted with that in mind. On the deterrence that we need to be able to provide and the money we need to spend to provide it, the commitment is as it has been: as the Prime Minister has said, he will set out a path to 2.5% once the strategic defence review has been published, and we expect that to be in the spring.

Claire Hazelgrove (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Lab): As the Minister will know from her many welcome visits, my constituency is home to many defence companies that are playing a vital role in this conflict. Does she agree that it is crucial that we continue to support companies here in the UK to get military kit into the hands of those in Ukraine who need it most?

Maria Eagle: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. I have had the pleasure of visiting her constituency on several occasions, and when it was her predecessor's constituency as well, so I am well aware of the strength of its defence industrial base. We need to strengthen that base across our nations and regions, and we are doing that. That has the additional importance of providing deterrence for our nation as well as supporting Ukraine.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Will the Minister agree that this clarifies what the benchmark of success for the defence review must be?

As some of the defence chiefs have been expressing, we must be ready, if necessary, to fight a war with Russia if we are to deter it and if we are to be in any position to guarantee the security of an independent and sovereign Ukraine after whatever is agreed between President Trump and President Putin.

Maria Eagle: I agree—we all agree—with the hon. Gentleman that defence spending needs to increase. That must be done in the context of us setting out in the SDR precisely where we see the threats. It is important to spend money correctly and in the best possible way, and I do not think that there is any real disagreement across the Chamber about that. We will see in due course whether those challenges are met when the strategic defence review is published and we set out the path to 2.5%—

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): When?

Maria Eagle: In the spring.

Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I welcome the statement that any negotiations about Ukraine must involve Ukraine. In that spirit, has the Minister or any of her colleagues had conversations with their counterparts in Ukraine following the recent developments to find out how they are feeling? If not, do they plan to soon?

Maria Eagle: I have not, but I know my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has been having discussions and, indeed, our discussions are ongoing and frequent. I have had contact with my counterpart in Ukraine, just not since yesterday.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): Yesterday, no matter that we in this House wish it was not the case, the people of Ukraine were betrayed and the crimes of aggression and annexation were rewarded in a telephone call between Washington and Moscow. Right now, we have to be building closer partnerships with our European allies for whom democracy, sovereignty and the rule of law still actually mean something. I welcome the Government's announcement that they defend the territorial integrity of Ukraine, but how will the Government do that in the face of two men who believe that, because of their military superiority, they can do whatever they want to whomever they want?

Maria Eagle: The US Secretary of Defence made it clear yesterday that any peace negotiations that the Americans are involved in need to lead to a durable peace that does not see a resumption of the aggression that has led to this war, and we support that. We have also made it quite clear that these negotiations must involve Ukraine—of course they must. That is the way in which this war will finally end.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement, particularly the commitment that any negotiations about Ukraine must involve Ukraine, because if reports of the call between President Trump and Moscow are to be believed, this is less the art of the deal and more a charter for appeasement. Will we be working with NATO allies to

establish a clear road map with defined timeframes for Ukraine's NATO membership, ensuring long-term deterrence against inevitable further Russian aggression?

Maria Eagle: We have always said that Ukraine's rightful place is in NATO, and our position is that Ukraine is on an irreversible path to NATO membership. However, we have also always been clear that the process will take time. I have already said quite clearly that the fate of Ukraine in these negotiations cannot be determined without Ukraine being fully involved, and that is our priority. At the moment, warfighting is still happening to put Ukraine in the strongest possible position to negotiate from strength.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): In 1994, Russia—along with the UK and the US—signed the Budapest memorandum, pledging to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. Given Russia's flagrant breach of that undertaking, why should Ukraine believe a word that Putin says without concrete security guarantees?

Maria Eagle: The right hon. Gentleman is correct that there must be security guarantees, and the US Defence Secretary said as much. These are all matters for any negotiations that take place. Of course, we will be supporting Ukraine, and we have made it quite clear that there cannot be a peace that does not involve Ukraine or that it does not support.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): Can the Minister assure the House that it is UK Government policy that not only must Ukraine be involved in a peace and in securing its territorial integrity, but it is only the Ukrainian people—not President Trump, nor President Putin—who can determine the destiny of Ukraine?

Maria Eagle: We have said that Ukraine must be involved in those negotiations, and that peace negotiations need two sides to come an agreement. It therefore clearly follows that the Ukrainians must be content with whatever the process comes up with. There must be security guarantees, and the peace must be durable—everybody agrees with that.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Is the Minister concerned that President Trump is repeating false Kremlin propaganda and perpetuating a gross misrepresentation of the war in Ukraine by suggesting that, for Ukraine, this

“was not a good war to go into”?

Will the UK Government be making it clear to the US President in no uncertain terms that Ukraine has just defended itself from invasion, bombing, rape, murder and occupation, and that it is an outrage for President Trump to suggest that Ukraine should give up its sovereign territory to Russia?

Maria Eagle: We have made quite clear with our 100-year partnership with Ukraine that we back it in the long term. We have provided Ukraine with support from many parties across this Chamber over a number of years to ensure that it can continue its fight, and we will continue to support Ukraine during any negotiations that take place so that it can get the peace that it wishes to have.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): The Minister's commitment to continued defence support for Ukraine is essential, and I am sure the House's thoughts are with Ukrainians who are fighting for their freedoms and all the Ukrainians in our own communities who have found sanctuary in this country. Does she agree that any settlement cannot be a repeat of the Budapest memorandum or the Minsk agreements, which failed to deter future Russian imperial aggression?

Maria Eagle: I think everybody agrees that any peace that is negotiated must be durable. That will require security guarantees, given the past experience that the Ukrainians have of Russia and Russian aggression.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): As the Minister will be aware, much of the Russian war effort is being sustained by other nations, including several of the BRIC nations, which are supporting Russia through direct military aid or dual-use products. What is the Minister doing to try to deter the flow of arms that is continuing to sustain Russia?

Maria Eagle: The right hon. Gentleman will know very well that there are sanctions, which we do our best to police, and they have had some impact. I think they have to continue both while the war is still ongoing and while the peace is being considered and negotiated.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): All wars end, but I know it is the feeling of Members across the House that we very much owe it to the men and women fighting for Ukraine that, when this war ends, it does so with Ukraine in a position of strength at the table and in the driving seat on the terms and timescales.

Maria Eagle: I agree with my hon. Friend that we need to continue to support Ukraine to put it in the strongest possible position both while it is fighting the war and during any negotiations that take place.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Could we take a moment to reflect on the hundreds of thousands of lives that have been lost in this war—Ukrainian civilians, Ukrainian soldiers, Russian soldiers—and all the families who are mourning today?

Efforts were made earlier on by Latin American and African leaders and the Pope to try to negotiate an end to this war, and we may now have an opportunity to demonstrate that one country should never occupy another. Does the Minister believe that there is any possibility in the near future of a ceasefire, ahead of negotiations, that would be acceptable to the people of Ukraine as well as the rest of Europe, because we need to see an end to this ghastly conflict?

Maria Eagle: The right hon. Gentleman is correct that conflicts such as this need to come to an end as soon as possible, so I acknowledge the point he makes about the death on all sides and how bad that is. However, I think it is important for any peace that may be negotiated to be durable and lasting, so we need to focus our minds at present on supporting Ukraine as much as we can so that it goes into any such negotiations in the strongest possible position.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Given Putin's illegal invasion and declared intent, do the Government agree that any negotiations must result in a sovereign Ukraine, and that the UK will play its part in providing security guarantees that are meaningful, unlike those of the past, because that is crucial to securing a lasting peace?

Maria Eagle: The hon. Member is right that security guarantees are likely to be an important part of any peace agreement given the past history. We have a 100-year partnership with Ukraine, and we are committed to ensuring that it can defend its sovereign capability to continue to exist. While it is too early to talk about any details of what those security guarantees may be, we are committed to making sure that Ukraine can continue as an independent state.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): On Monday, there will be a concert in Bath abbey in support of Ukraine. My constituents have been unstinting in their support for Ukrainians living among us, but also for Ukrainian communities such as in Oleksandriia. Now is not the point at which to weaken our support. How will the Government ensure that Ukraine's voice is heard loud and clear in any peace talks, and that no European countries may potentially, or will ultimately, be bullied by US President Trump?

Maria Eagle: I agree very much with the hon. Lady when she says that our Ukrainian friends here in this nation have received a lot of support—not only in her constituency, but across the UK—from their friends and neighbours, and that that will continue. We have a 100-year partnership with Ukraine. We have supported the Ukrainians through the toughest times of this war with arms and other necessary support, and we will continue to do so.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I am sure the Minister will acknowledge, as I do, the huge effort of the Ukrainian diaspora in the UK, of which a large proportion is in Scotland, particularly in and around my constituency. Given the huge efforts they have made, does she agree that we must not convey the idea in the coming weeks that we have in any way let them or their countrymen down?

Maria Eagle: I do agree with that, and we have no intention—I think in any part of this House—of doing so.

Mr Speaker: I call Jim Shannon

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Speaker—I am surprised to be called so early.

Mr Speaker: Do you want to wait a minute?

Jim Shannon: No, no—I will grab the chance.

I thank the Minister for her answers. It is obvious to me and other Members of this House that she has a heart that wants to help those in Ukraine, and we appreciate that, especially since it comes from Government. I welcome the potential peace that might come, but of course it has to be a peace of justice; it has to be fair to the Ukrainians, and we hope a way can be found. Does

she agree that any signs of negotiation are to be welcomed, but that there can be no doubt that Ukraine retains the support of this House? She has said that, and everyone has said it. What role will the UK have in ensuring that the people of Ukraine have security from further Russian aggression when Putin recalibrates his forces a year or two from now?

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise these concerns. It is clear that any peace that is negotiated, which must have the consent of the Ukrainians themselves, has to be durable, and to the extent that that requires security guarantees, those have to be present for it to work.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): It is a truism from ancient Roman times that if we want peace, we must prepare for war, and I am glad the strategic defence review is preparing us for war—sadly—although in slow motion, unfortunately. Will the SDR consider the unlocked back door that is Ireland, which sits outwith NATO? It is clear that alarm bells are ringing in NATO, but Ireland, cash rich, sits outside NATO and has a critical role in defending undersea cables. We learn from the Irish press that its navy is setting sail without sufficient officers to man its main guns—it is sending out gunboats without guns. What can we do to encourage Ireland to play a full role in what will, I think, be a confrontation with Russia?

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman is right that we need to prepare. The strategic defence review will set out the threats that we face and we will then turn our attention to making sure we obtain the capabilities to deal with them. Obviously we will look at any weaknesses there might be and try to shore them up.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): Every time President Trump makes a statement about Ukraine I hear from constituents that they are terrified for the future of Ukraine, and never more so than in the last 24 hours. Will the Minister confirm whether the British Government were consulted on or told about President Trump's call with Vladimir Putin beforehand?

Maria Eagle: I am afraid it is above my pay grade to know the answer to that question, but I am sure the hon. Gentleman will have an opportunity to ask those whose pay grade it is not above at another questions session. As far as I am aware we have had friendly conversations at the Ukraine defence contact group with members of the US Administration.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What practical help are the Government providing to Ukraine's legal system and judges to ensure the prosecution of war crimes?

Maria Eagle: We have a 100-year partnership with Ukraine, which has been signed. That will be supporting it in any way it feels it needs support that we might be able to offer. I cannot answer the hon. Gentleman's question today about what help we have given, but I am absolutely certain that if Ukraine asks us for help and it is considered that our legal profession is able to supply it, we will think about doing so.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Does the Minister not agree that the lesson to draw from this is the importance of military strength, working with all our NATO and European allies, but critically being able to stand on our own two feet militarily? We need to see defence spending as investment, and in that light does she wish we were not giving however many billions of pounds it is to Mauritius and that we could invest that money in our defences instead?

Maria Eagle: We have a commitment to getting our defence spending back to 2.5% of GDP, and the last time it was at that level was at the time of the last Labour Government.

Business of the House

11.14 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): The business for the week commencing 24 February includes:

MONDAY 24 FEBRUARY—Remaining stages of the Crown Estate Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 25 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (Transfer of Functions etc) Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 26 FEBRUARY—Opposition day (5th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition, subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 27 FEBRUARY—General debate on the third anniversary of the war in Ukraine, followed by a general debate on St David's day. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 28 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 3 March will include:

MONDAY 3 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Finance Bill.

TUESDAY 4 MARCH—All stages of the Church of Scotland (Lord High Commissioner) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 5 MARCH—Estimates day (1st allotted day). At 7 pm the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

THURSDAY 6 MARCH—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 7 MARCH—Private Members' Bills.

Jesse Norman: Like some of our leading podcasters, we love a storm cloud or two in business questions. Sure enough, the poor Government have been desperately hoping that recent events in America would drive the storm clouds away from the UK economy. Even though the news from Washington DC has been startling, to say the least, it has not been enough to dispel yet another week of adverse economic headlines. Both the Office for Budget Responsibility and the Bank of England have reportedly downgraded their growth forecasts, the latter cutting its by half, to a measly 0.75% for the year. So much for the Chancellor's much-vaunted dash for growth.

Meanwhile, the National Institute of Economic and Social Research has reported that "zero fiscal headroom remains" to deal with any shocks, in the same week that President Trump has announced 25% tariffs on steel. It is easy to see what has happened here: Labour never expected President Trump to win. It sent a team over to campaign for his opponent. The Government passed an anti-growth Budget, and they did not build enough leeway into their financial planning. Indeed, the Chancellor promised no new taxes or spending. Now we are having to live with the consequences.

It was also hard to miss the continuing controversy that the Attorney General is creating, and harder still not to notice the extremely critical words of his Labour

[Jesse Norman]

colleague, Lord Glasman. I do not propose to repeat those words here, but they point to two issues that demand this House's full and proper attention. In both cases, the concern is not over the legal positions taken by the Attorney General as such, but the contradictions that they offer to the rest of Government policy. People can agree or disagree about the policy, but the contradictions cannot be fudged. They cannot be blamed on others, and they require explanation.

The first contradiction is in relation to international law. On 3 February, the Attorney General told the Council of Europe that the Government would

"never withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights, or refuse to comply with judgments of the court".

In doing so, he was simply restating settled UK policy for many decades, a fact that he somehow neglected to mention. The difficulty arises, however, because the Government's new legislation on small boats appears to retain a measure banning migrants from claiming protections under the modern slavery laws. That is a ban that the Prime Minister went out of his way to denounce when it was first introduced in 2023. In his words:

"It is a crying shame that...we face legislation that drives a coach and horses through our world-leading modern slavery framework, which protects women from exploitation."—[*Official Report*, 8 March 2023; Vol. 729, c. 295.]

That is quite a U-turn. You see the deeper problem, Mr Speaker. Which is it to be: will the Government abide by international law in this instance and protect women from exploitation, as the Prime Minister said, or will they reverse his newly adopted position in support of the ban?

The second problem relates to domestic law. Last November, the Attorney General strengthened his official guidance to Government lawyers on possible legal risk. He specifically cautioned against offering legal support for policies that have only a tenable case. Elsewhere, he has pledged to restore checks on Executive—that is, Government—action. This comes at a time when the Prime Minister has specifically pledged to end vexatious litigation while building a huge amount of new housing and infrastructure. You see the problem, Mr Speaker. It was the problem that the noble Lord Glasman was pointing out when he praised the rule of law, but not of lawyers. This edict will have a chilling effect on what I think we can already agree is pretty sluggish decision making by Ministers.

Will the Government now take less legal risk, as the Attorney General requires? Will their lawyers now require Ministers to act only when they can defeat a legal challenge, or will they curb the judicial reviews and other legal cases that will otherwise inevitably disrupt their building plans? I do not expect the Leader of the House to tell us how the Government plan to resolve those obvious problems today, but the House would be grateful for a debate in Government time on what on earth the Government's approach will be to resolving them.

Lucy Powell: May I first update the House on the work of the Modernisation Committee, which I chair? We established the Committee to rebuild trust in politics, raise standards, improve culture and make Parliament more effective. In recent years, the role of an MP has changed significantly, with many more demands and

expectations in the constituency. The make-up of the Commons has changed a great deal too; many more parties are represented and Members better reflect the country we serve. So how we do things needs to change, too. I thank all of those who contributed to our wide-ranging call for views.

Work is already under way, with the Standards Committee's inquiry on Members' outside employment and the Procedure Committee's inquiry on proxy votes and call lists. Today, we have set out three further areas for consideration: improving accessibility; ensuring that the Chamber remains the crucible of national debate; and how we can provide more certainty on parliamentary business.

The right hon. Gentleman raised a number of points and gave a list of economic statistics. I might give him some alternative ones, if I may. Inflation is down, mortgage rates are coming down, wages are growing at their fastest rate in three years, business investment is at the highest level for 19 years, and the International Monetary Fund and the OECD are both saying that Britain will be Europe's fastest growing major economy in coming years. He supported the former Prime Minister—not the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), who is in his place, but the one who crashed the economy and sent mortgage rates flying and inflation to record highs—so I will not take lectures from him.

Yet again, the right hon. Gentleman raised the Attorney General. Quite honestly, the way in which the Conservatives and their friends in the right-wing media are trying to undermine the Attorney General is pathetic. They were once the party of law and order, and now they seek to undermine law and order at every turn. As someone who works closely with the Attorney General, I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that he is an asset to the Government and a formidable partner in our attempts to restore integrity to how we make and implement laws in this country. The Conservatives' laws did not fit that remit, and that is why in many cases they never got off the ground. They were challenged time and again in the courts, wasting everyone's time and money and not delivering the outcomes that they wanted. We will not take lectures from them on that.

The shadow Leader of the House did not want to talk about the substance of the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, which we debated this week. That is because the previous Government lost control of our borders: net migration rose to a record high of almost 1 million in their last year in office, and small boat crossings increased by one hundredfold. To be fair to him, he knew that the Rwanda plan was a gimmick and would not work—he said as much when he resigned as a Minister—but I am at a loss as to why he and Conservative Front Benchers voted against giving the Border Security Command new counter-terrorism powers and other measures. They are chasing the tail of Reform so much that they are going around in dizzying circles, leaving the incredible sight of the modern Conservative party voting against strengthening our borders.

I also noticed that the right hon. Gentleman did not take up my invitation last week to celebrate the Leader of the Opposition's first 100 days in office. Earlier this week, however, he did mark the anniversary of another leader being elected. Those were the days, weren't they? Back then, the Tory party knew what it stood for—back

when it was a serious party and represented large parts of the country. I am not sure Margaret Thatcher would even recognise the Conservative party today. It is no wonder the Conservatives herald and respect their former leaders far more than their current leader. Let us be honest: like their current leader, their party is a shadow of its former self.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Women's centres provide vital support for women facing issues including isolation, domestic abuse, health problems and navigating the social security system, among a wide range of other support. I recently visited Stockport Women's Centre and want to place on the record my thanks to all the staff and volunteers there who support women from across Stockport. Can we have a debate in Government time on the enormous contribution of organisations that support women in our society, in particular women's centres across England, and on how to secure the essential funding they need to continue their important work?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the women's refuge in Stockport on the work it does. He will know that this Government are committed to tackling violence against women and girls and that we want to halve those statistics over the next 10 years. That is a huge ambition and will take detailed and committed work, which I know he will join us in doing.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): As we now know, local government is being reorganised, and the Labour Government have cancelled local elections while affected councils work out how on earth they will reorganise themselves. Like many residents in these areas, I would have hoped that that plan would have been in place before the elections were cancelled; many issues are very much up in the air, and the public deserve to know what they are in for.

In Woking, for example, successive Conservative administrations at the council racked up £2 billion of debt with absolutely no plan for how to pay it off. In Greater Essex, Conservative-run Thurrock ran up debts of around £1.5 billion largely due to investments in a solar farm that did not exist. With both Essex and Surrey now on the fast track for local government reorganisation, what will happen to those debts?

Last week, the Minister for Local Government and English Devolution, the hon. Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton (Jim McMahon), wrote a letter to all the leaders of the two-tier councils and unitary authorities in Essex, in which he said:

"there is no proposal for council debt to be addressed centrally or written off as part of reorganisation...proposals should reflect the extent to which the implications of this can be managed locally."

Will the Leader of the House ask the Minister to come forward with a statement to confirm that what he really means is that residents across places such as Essex and Surrey will be forced to pay for the incompetence of previous Tory administrations of other councils, and that they are likely to see reduced services and higher council tax bills simply because this Labour Government are determined to press ahead with local government reorganisation but not prepared to offer any financial support to alleviate that?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Lady raises the important issue of local government finances, and she is right to identify the mess those finances were left in by the previous Government. Many councils had to spend their reserves on statutory services, which is not what they are intended for. We saw council after council going bust month after month under the previous Government, and many more were left in severe debt, like the ones she has described.

We have given local government a significant settlement this year, but we recognise that more needs to be done. We need to fix the long-term problems; we need multi-year settlements. I know the transition will be difficult, but the devolution revolution—giving local areas more say and more powers over how they spend and raise their revenue—will, in time, lead to more secure and sustainable funding for local government. I will ensure the relevant Minister comes to this House with regular updates.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): At the stroke of a pen, Tory-led Northumberland county council is about to wipe 9,000 people off the county's housing waiting list. My office is beset by constituents in desperate need of secure and affordable accommodation, but even those in the highest priority bandings are often unable to get the housing they need. This is a simple, callous attempt to massage the huge housing list rather than deal with the issue. Can we have a debate in Government time on how to ensure that those in need of decent, affordable housing are not easily cast aside and thrown on to the scrap heap, as in the case of Northumberland county council?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear about what has happened with Northumberland county council and its housing waiting list. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to identify that waiting lists are far too high and that many people are in desperate need of affordable, social or council housing. That is why the Government are really committed to not just building 1.5 million new homes over the course of the Parliament, but ensuring that we have very many more council houses, affordable houses and social houses. We announced further plans on that this week, and I will ensure that Ministers are accountable on these matters.

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

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I remind the House that the Backbench Business Committee is taking applications for estimates day debates on 5 March, and that applications close a week tomorrow. We will then consider the applications for debates—we understand that there may be several—at our meeting on 25 February.

In addition to the business announced by the Leader of the House, on 6 March there will be a debate on International Women's Day, followed by a debate on political finance rules. On Thursday 13 March, if we are given the time, there will be a debate on the future of farming, followed by a debate on knife crime among children and young people. On a rough calculation, with the queue of applications we have for the Chamber, we have enough business to allocate until the end of June, provided we are given every single available Thursday.

In Westminster Hall when we come back, on Tuesday 25 February there will be a debate on maternity services, followed on the Thursday by a debate on rural crime

[*Bob Blackman*]

and a debate on women's health. I will leave the other business for when we come back.

On Sunday 23 February, when we are due to come back after recess, the renowned hate preacher Mohamed Hoblos is due to speak in this country. He has been banned in Germany and Holland. The shadow Home Secretary has written to the Home Secretary asking that he be banned from this country. Given that antisemitism is at its highest peak ever and that anti-Muslim hatred is at a peak, it is clear that the last thing we want is someone coming along stirring up racial and religious hatred. Will the Leader of the House use her good offices to encourage the Home Secretary to issue a banning order to prevent this man from coming to this country?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for announcing the forthcoming Backbench Business in the Chamber and in Westminster Hall. I am sure he will understand that I cannot guarantee him every Thursday between now and the end of June, but we have been allocating Backbench Business debates regularly and often, and hopefully they will be filled in the usual way. I am really glad to hear about the debate on International Women's Day, which he and I have discussed. I will let colleagues know about this more formally, but we are hoping to arrange to get all the women Members of the House together for a photo in the Chamber to mark International Women's Day.

Mr Speaker: Which I have not approved, but I will do now!

Lucy Powell: Sorry, Mr Speaker. That is why I am not formally announcing it, but saying that we are hoping to. I am gently lobbying for it through your good offices, thank you very much indeed.

The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) raises a serious matter, as he often does, about how we tackle antisemitism and hate speech, and how we take action to ensure that those who are spreading hate and antisemitism are prevented from doing so. I shall certainly raise the matter with the Home Secretary and make sure that he gets a full response.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): This week I was visited by some constituents as part of the Board of Deputies of British Jews parliamentary advocacy day. We talked about how great our local multi-faith forum is, and it was suggested that we should have a British-Jewish culture month to celebrate all the multicultural elements and diversity in the Jewish community. One constituent said to me, "You could have two Jewish people in the room and three different opinions." Would it not be wonderful if we could have that culture month, and could we perhaps spend some Government time discussing it?

Lucy Powell: I am very pleased that my hon. Friend had such a good meeting with the Board of Deputies, and I thank her for all the work that she does—along with other Members on both sides of the House—to organise multi-faith gatherings and bring people together. She is right to refer to the fantastic contribution that the Jewish community have long made, and continue to make, at the heart of our country, and I am sure that others will support her call for a British-Jewish culture month.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con):

Last week I met two of my constituents, Mark Farrow and Stephen White, who volunteer for the Driving Ukraine charity, which takes modified vehicles to Ukraine to serve as ambulances and for other humanitarian purposes. Later this month, they will take one more vehicle out, funded by generous donations from local people. Will the Leader of the House join me in commending their efforts, as well as the charitable contributions made by so many across our country in support of Ukraine and the Ukrainian people? May I also thank her for giving us an opportunity to commemorate their efforts during the week following the recess?

Lucy Powell: Let me take this opportunity to pay my respects to the right hon. Gentleman. The way in which he has conducted himself since leaving office and remained here as a parliamentarian, active on behalf of his constituents, provides a model for others to follow. I do, of course, join him in commending Mark and Steve for the work that they do. The whole House wants to support Ukraine and, indeed, we have continued to do so, as have many of our constituents in a range of ways. I am very pleased that we will have that debate when we return.

David Baines (St Helens North) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on rugby football league, I will start by thanking you, Mr Speaker, and congratulating you on your recent term as president of the Rugby Football League. You have always been a great champion of the greatest game, and I thank you for that. I am sure you are as excited as I am that the season is under way and the super league kicks off tonight.

This year, rugby league celebrates its 130th anniversary. In all that time, no representative of the sport has ever received the highest honour of a knighthood or damehood, although there have been many worthy candidates for those honours and recipients of others, including Billy Boston, Alex Murphy and Kevin Sinfield. Does the Leader of the House share my dismay, frustration and surprise at this oversight? Can she advise me on how best to raise it, and who with, to ensure that our great game and some of the outstanding individuals who represent it receive the recognition that they deserve?

Lucy Powell: I certainly recognise the issue that my hon. Friend has raised, and I know that you, Mr Speaker, will share some of his views. I am not speaking for you, of course, but I know that we all want to recognise the valuable contribution that rugby league makes to our communities and our country.

It is indeed a surprise that rugby league players have not been honoured in the way that others have. As my hon. Friend will know, I cannot comment on the right of individuals to be awarded honours, but I too think that Kevin Sinfield has been an incredible ambassador not just for sport but for charitable fundraising, and he is definitely someone I think we should all consider. I shall ensure that the powers that be have heard my hon. Friend's comments, and I will help him to make representations.

Mr Speaker: Let me just say, as I have been tempted into the conversation, that I have raised this matter with the Prime Minister, because there is a major injustice in the stigma attached to rugby league and the fact that

not one player has ever been knighted. Given that Kevin Sinfield has raised millions for motor neurone disease charities, I should have thought that now is the time and we should wait no longer.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): On Monday, the Home Office published updated guidance that seems to prevent anyone from being granted citizenship if they have come to this country through a dangerous journey, despite the fact that for the vast majority of those seeking refuge, there are no safe and legal routes available. Can we have a debate in Government time on this deeply misjudged policy, and in particular on the call from a former Home Secretary to the current Home Secretary to consider very carefully its implications?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that matter. She will be aware that there are long-standing rules that prevent those who arrive illegally in this country from being granted citizenship. We have strengthened those rules in a small way for those who arrive on small boats, so that they also will not be able to become British citizens. It is important that we take away some of the pull factors that bring people to this country and that we take tough action to control our borders. She makes a very important point about safe routes, which I know the Home Secretary has been taking action on and updates the House on regularly, but I will ensure she continues to do so.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House will be aware that the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill has been in Committee this week, slightly delayed, and for good reason, because it is obviously a very important issue to debate. Can she confirm whether the Government will still wait until the end of the Committee stage before publishing the impact assessment on the Bill?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right: the Bill has gone into line-by-line consideration in Committee this week. She will be aware that it is a private Member's Bill and that the Government remain neutral on the issue, as it is a matter of conscience, but the Government have been clear that we will work with the Committee—indeed, there are Ministers on the Committee—to ensure that the Bill is workable and operable, and any such assessments will be made available in due course.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): This week is Wear it Red week, an opportunity to show our support for the amazing work of the Midlands Air Ambulance Charity. My question to the Leader of the House—as it is the week before recess, I am being gentle on her—is, will she join me in congratulating and thanking the Midlands Air Ambulance Charity for the amazing work it does in support of my constituents, the wider midlands and our NHS?

Lucy Powell: I thank the right hon. Lady for being gentle on me—I do not mind her being robust with me either; that is what the job is all about, and I am here for that. I will absolutely join her in congratulating the Midlands Air Ambulance Charity on the critical work it does, often in a voluntary capacity. Had I known it was Wear it Red week, I would have worn one of my red outfits—maybe next time she will let me know.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Last week was a big one for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme. On Tuesday, Mayor Ros Jones announced that Munich Airport International will provide operational and management services for Doncaster Sheffield airport upon its reopening. Then on Thursday, the Chancellor visited Yorkshire wildlife park—it is amazing; come and see it—with Dan Fell and businesses from the chamber of commerce to discuss, among other things, her support for the reopening of the airport. With National Apprenticeship Week currently taking place, it is vital that investment in projects such as this creates skilled jobs in the area. Will the Leader of the House join me in recognising the importance of creating skilled jobs across the UK, and will she support me and other local MPs as we work with businesses to ensure that apprenticeship opportunities are in place when our airport reopens?

Lucy Powell: Once again, my hon. Friend lives up to the name I have given him: Mr Doncaster Airport. I am pleased to hear that preparations have moved a step closer for flights coming into Doncaster again. He raises the importance of a project such as Doncaster airport being about not just transport connectivity but bringing jobs and opportunity for young people in the community. I commend him for his work.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I shall try to avoid the temptation to say that when the Leader of the House, in her upbeat way, describes the Attorney General as an asset, we can all agree at least on the first syllable, and instead ask for a debate on—[HON. MEMBERS: “Oh!”] It took a while! Instead, I will ask for a debate on trends in defence spending during and after the cold war, so that those on both sides of the House have the chance to appreciate that when we are involved in a serious confrontation, we should not be arguing about 2.5%; we should be arguing for a figure much nearer to the 5% that President Trump, for once, is right to demand.

Lucy Powell: I will ignore the right hon. Gentleman's invitation to say anything other than I absolutely stand by my comment that the Attorney General is a fantastic asset for this Government, and we are lucky to have him working with us.

The right hon. Gentleman will know that this Government are absolutely committed to working towards spending 2.5% of GDP on defence, but he is right to point out that defence spending has been too low to meet our country's strategic needs. He will also know that the last time Government spending on defence reached 2.5% of GDP was under the last Labour Government. It never reached that level under his party.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): Could we have a debate on Thames Water, which provides water disservices to 20 million people in this country? We now know that the company received from bill payers money that was supposed to be spent on environmental measures such as stopping illegal discharges, and that that money has been used to pay bonuses and dividends. We need to discuss whether the people running Thames Water are fit and proper persons to run a public company.

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: the way our water industry has been run over recent years is absolutely shocking, with shareholder dividends being

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paid out over and above infrastructure spending and addressing discharges and other things in our waterways. It is absolutely shocking, which is why this Government have brought in the Water (Special Measures) Bill, which is about to receive Royal Assent and will stop erroneous bonuses. We have established a new Independent Water Commission, and there are further reforms coming, but I will ensure that the House is kept fully up to date.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): The main road through my constituency of Woking has been closed for the fourth time in short succession following cladding falling off a hotel. Cladding fell off it during construction, and has fallen off it since it opened. The developer, Sir Robert McAlpine, is responsible and seems to be in no rush to fix this problem. Will the Leader of the House please agree to hold a debate on the responsibility of developers? If companies prove that they cannot deliver, they should lose the right to work for the public sector.

Lucy Powell: The hon. Gentleman will know that the cladding scandal is a shocking embarrassment for our country, and we still have some way to go in putting that right. The Government set out a remediation action plan just before Christmas—that is on top of the Building Safety Act 2022, which was passed under the previous Government—but we absolutely need to be able to hold freeholders and developers to account when they put dangerous cladding on buildings and refuse to replace it.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Belfrey in York is losing around £1.4 million through the changes to the listed places of worship grant scheme. The National Railway Museum was promised money by the last Government—I appreciate that it was not necessarily real money—but that has been taken away. Both those projects are midway through development. Will the Leader of the House make representations to the Chancellor to say that when projects are under way but have been stripped down after development has started, money should be put in place to ensure that they can be completed?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear what is happening to the Belfrey in York. My hon. Friend will know that we have had to look at making some changes to the listed places of worship grant scheme, but I will certainly ensure that her particular—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) says that the scheme has been cut. In fact, the previous scheme, like many others run by the previous Government, was a work of fiction, and there was not the funding that people thought was there. I will ensure that my hon. Friend gets a full reply about the particular case that she raises.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): Those who have recently visited the Fylde coast will have seen lots of volunteers burying Christmas trees in the sand, and I am sure Mr Speaker will back me up by confirming that this is not a strange Lancashire tradition. It is actually a fantastic wildlife trust project to vastly extend the sand dunes, which are vital for nature and Fylde's flood defences. Over the years, more than 11,000 Christmas trees have been buried to help rebuild the sand dunes, 80% of which have been lost over the last 150 years. The project has seen 6 hectares of dunes completely replenished.

The Deputy Prime Minister recently agreed to nip up the road to Fylde to have a pint with me to discuss an issue, so could I tempt the Leader of the House with an ice cream, to come for a walk with me on St Anne's beach to see this project, to meet some of the fantastic people who have put in more than 10,500 hours of volunteering, and to discuss coastal life?

Lucy Powell: I have many happy memories of rolling down the sand dunes in the hon. Gentleman's constituency as a child—and as an adult, but the less said about that the better.

I had heard about the project to restore the dunes, but I had not appreciated that so many Christmas trees were being buried. I am always happy to accept such a lovely invitation, but perhaps we can wait until the weather is a bit nicer.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I am sorry that I forgot to wear red today.

If we are to meet net zero, we need to address the CO₂ emissions from our housing stock. We have some of the oldest housing stock in Europe, and it accounts for 17% of our CO₂ emissions. As I understand it, one issue is that houses in conservation areas and grade II properties cannot be changed to double glazing or secondary glazing. Can we have a debate on the hundreds of thousands of affected homes across this country? These households want to do the right thing for this country by reducing their CO₂ emissions, and they want to reduce their bills. That means changing their glazing—it is as simple as that—so we need to change our planning legislation.

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The warm homes scheme and the other measures that the Government are introducing are vital to reducing our demand for energy, as well as reducing people's bills.

My hon. Friend raises an important point, and there is always a balance to be struck between keeping people's homes warm and their bills down, while retaining heritage and other matters. He is right to raise this point, and I will ensure that he gets a full response.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I strongly support the request of the hon. Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) for a statement on Thames Water. This company pays out its huge profits to shareholders and executives, presides over leaks across the region and pollutes our seas and rivers. To me, it is an example of the disaster of privatising the water industry.

We need a clear statement from the Government that, instead of regulation, they will return Thames Water to public ownership so that the people of London and the whole region can enjoy clean water, and so that our seas will no longer be polluted.

Lucy Powell: The right hon. Gentleman is right that there have been severe problems, which have let everybody down. The problems, which stem from severe failures in the governance and regulation that underpin the water sector, are completely unacceptable. We passed the Water (Special Measures) Bill, which will shortly receive Royal Assent, to stop these erroneous bonuses being paid for poor performance. We will soon be introducing wider water reform, and the measures are currently under review. I will ensure that the House is updated and that the right hon. Gentleman's opinions are included.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): This week, the UK Government announced positive changes to apprenticeships that will cut red tape and increase collaboration between businesses and skills providers, setting more young people on a path to successful careers. In Scotland, by contrast, the last two years have seen delays and freezes on modern apprenticeships, harming people in my constituency and across Scotland. Does the Leader of the House agree that the SNP should follow the lead set by this UK Labour Government and take radical action to support the next generation of the workforce?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Let us be honest: the Scottish Government have failed on apprenticeships, with a 10-year decline in apprenticeship starts and numbers. This new Labour Government are absolutely determined to turn around the problems we have seen with apprenticeships in England and elsewhere. That is why we are unlocking 10,000 new apprenticeship starts this week with some of our changes. The Scottish Government should follow our lead and ensure that young people in Scotland get the opportunities they deserve.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I would like the Leader of the House to be made aware that the residents of the Oldchurch estate in Romford have been terribly let down by Sanctuary housing association for months on end, with long delays to urgent repairs leaving residents suffering without heating or hot water throughout winter, as well as malfunctioning lifts rendering disabled residents prisoners in their own homes. As she will know, section 11 of the Housing Act 2004 mandates landlords to carry out essential repairs within a reasonable timeframe, but that is often not enforced in practice, leaving constituents such as mine living in unacceptably poor conditions. Will the Leader of the House please ask the Minister for Housing and Planning to make a statement on that frightful situation and take urgent action to get such a heartbreaking matter resolved as quickly as possible for my constituents?

Lucy Powell: May I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that on behalf of his constituents? I am sure it is something that many of us across the House are familiar with. I am really sorry to hear of the poor service and the poor state of repair of houses provided by Sanctuary in his constituency. He will know that that is one reason the Government want to strengthen the rights of renters, whether they be in social or private housing. We are currently taking the Renters' Rights Bill through both Houses, which will give those living in the hon. Gentleman's constituency even more rights to ensure that they live in a decent, well-maintained and safe home.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, I know that I and many new Members have been grateful over the last seven months for your guidance and for the support from your teams in helping us get to grips with the rules and procedures of this place, which I know the Leader of the House is committed to ensuring are upheld and respected at all times. I imagine that my right hon. Friend therefore shares my concern that last night's political broadcast from the Conservative party not only extensively featured the use of a taxpayer-funded ministerial car, but was filmed in part on the parliamentary estate in Speaker's Court, in direct contravention, as I understand it, of the rules of this House. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the matter is fully investigated?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that matter, which has very recently come to light. She is absolutely right; that is against protocol. It is against the protocol of this House to speak without permission, particularly in Speaker's Court. If the Leader of the Opposition is hearing this today, she should offer Mr Speaker a full and speedy apology. Also, we have high standards that we are all judged by and using ministerial and publicly paid-for cars for party political campaigning purposes is not allowed—and rightly so, because our constituents would not expect that to be the case. I hope the Leader of the Opposition has heard my hon. Friend's question today and takes action to put that right.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): With grateful thanks to the Backbench Business Committee, I am leading a debate in Westminster Hall this afternoon on HIV Testing Week. The all-party parliamentary group on HIV, Aids and sexual health is keen to highlight the week and very much welcomes the test taken by the Prime Minister as part of highlighting that facility. In poorer countries, however, tests and treatment are only available thanks to the resources from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Given the uncertainty of funding from the United States, can the Leader of the House ensure that a statement comes forward about the UK's approach to the replenishment of the Global Fund? This time around, the UK's leadership will be vital if the fund is to be sustained.

Lucy Powell: First, let me say that I have brought up with Ministers the issue that the right hon. Gentleman raised with me last week about the Hughes report. I hope that he and I will get a full reply on that. He yet again raises an important matter, and I congratulate him on securing a Westminster Hall debate on it this afternoon. HIV testing is very important. I was so proud that ours was the first Prime Minister to take a public HIV test; that will encourage others to do so. The right hon. Gentleman will know that it is our mission to end new transmissions of HIV in England by 2030. He raises important matters to do with the Global Fund. We support funding for it, and I will ensure that he is updated on how we will continue with that.

Gurinder Singh Josan (Smethwick) (Lab): As an officer of the all-party parliamentary group on semiconductors, it was a pleasure to join colleagues in welcoming academics, industrialists, researchers and manufacturers to a reception in the Palace this week to celebrate semiconductors. The UK has very real strength in this area. Our research base is the best in the world. Our manufacturing base, too, is world-beating, and we have semiconductor clusters across the UK, securing us high-quality employment in the compound semiconductor field. However, at the event, we were told that the industrial strategy mentions semiconductors only once. Will the Leader of the House ensure that Ministers are aware that a reliable supply chain for the high-quality semiconductor industry is important for our drive to become more self-sufficient in green energy, defence and other sectors, and for our growth agenda?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of the vital role for semiconductors in future technologies and in our current industry. We are a world leader in this space, particularly in his region. Semiconductors

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are covered in our industrial strategy; we have a new one for the first time in many years, and academia, business and others rightly welcome it. This is also about our economic security—making sure that we have these home-grown technologies and all that is needed to support them. I will ensure that he gets a full reply.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): This year marks the 160th anniversary of Ilkley train station, a vital transport link for my town. I am delighted to say that Steven Thornton—I met him again just last Saturday—and his wider team at the Friends Of Ilkley Rail Station are pressing ahead with developing a business case for improving interconnectivity between the train station and the buses that pick up from the adjoining street. This will improve accessibility and make the station a more inviting and user-friendly place for all. They are also trying to get toilets at Ilkley train station. Can we have a debate in Government time on how Government can support these vital projects in getting off the ground?

Lucy Powell: May I join the hon. Member in congratulating the Friends of Ilkley Train Station on all that they are doing to improve the experience for train users? The interchange with local buses is absolutely vital. I strongly support the provision of public toilets—lack of toilets is a particular bugbear of mine. This Government are taking great steps to ensure access for all on our transport network, including at Ilkley train station.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): My constituents in North Durham have endured months of inadequate services by Go North East. There have been widespread and last-minute bus cancellations, resulting in people missing school, work and health appointments. This issue is raised with me more than anything else at the moment. Can we have a debate in Government time about the reliability of bus services and the measures in place for holding operators to account for such poor service?

Lucy Powell: Affordable, reliable, local bus services are of great importance to all our constituents, and clearly to my hon. Friend's constituents as well. I am sorry to hear of the poor service that they have received. This Government are absolutely committed to delivering more reliable, affordable buses. We have brought forward the Bus Services (No.2) Bill, which, hopefully, will come before the House soon, and we have put in an extra £1 billion of investment. That is only the start. We really need to ensure that communities like my hon. Friend's are better served with better buses.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Will the Leader of the House allow time for us to debate the importance of small businesses to the rural economy? The annual Countryside Alliance awards celebrate rural businesses, communities and individuals who make significant contributions to the countryside. This year, I am delighted to report that there are four finalists from the Scottish Borders: the Gordon Arms, the Allanton Inn, Scott's of Kelso, and Andersen & Sondergaard Wild Game Charcuterie. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating those businesses on reaching the final, and agree that this is yet another fantastic reason to visit the Scottish Borders?

Lucy Powell: This is becoming a weekly occurrence, but I have to say that today's offer of an invitation is one that I really could take up. Visiting the hospitality businesses in the hon. Gentleman's constituency that have made the final of the Countryside Alliance awards would be fantastic. I congratulate them on getting so far.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): This week, Pub Aid announced the finalists of the community pub hero awards. There were more than 1,000 entries, and I am over the moon to be able to say that the Bird in Hand pub in my constituency of Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages is one of the 31 finalists. It is an incredible venue that does so much for the community in Stafford, and particularly for the Royal British Legion. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on the importance of pubs to their local communities, and will she visit the Bird in Hand with me when she next comes to Stafford?

Lucy Powell: I am getting a lot of invitations to pubs today. I have become a complete lightweight, so I am generally on zero-alcohol beer these days, but the Bird in Hand in Stafford sounds like a great hospitality venue. I congratulate it on being shortlisted. Pubs really are at the heart of our communities; they provide great fare and great company, and are a warm place for many people in these winter months. I think my hon. Friend might be inviting me to her constituency soon anyway; I am sure that we can pay a visit to the Bird in Hand soon.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): May I ask the Leader of the House for the help of her office, please? The Government have produced an elective reform plan, a key plank of which is having 10 direct-to-test pathways. I have written two parliamentary questions to find out what is being considered, and have been told that 10 pathways are under consideration. I raised the matter with the Health Secretary directly this week. He answered:

"If he wants to do a pop quiz, he can use Google."—[*Official Report*, 11 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 155.]

Google says that plans for 10 pathways are being considered. Here is why it matters: the plan had one example that was found to be unsafe, was met with outcry from doctors, and has been removed. How can this House and the public hold the Government to account if we do not get answers to questions? I know that the Health Secretary has been under a lot of pressure. He has lost a Health Minister, and Prime Minister Llama—I mean Starmer—has produced a new one, but that is no excuse for the Health Secretary not being across the detail. Will the Leader of the House kindly write to him to ask what 10 tests are being considered, so that we can scrutinise them properly in this House?

Lucy Powell: I think I will swerve the hon. Gentleman's invitation to make a party political point, because it is really not becoming of him on this occasion. He raises a serious matter, and he knows that I take very seriously the issue of parliamentary questions being answered in a timely and forthcoming way, with the information that the Member of Parliament is asking for actually provided in the answer. If that has not happened in this

case, I will absolutely take that up with the Health Secretary and ensure that the hon. Gentleman gets the full reply that he needs.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): A couple of weeks ago at my surgery in Wortley, I met a resident who had been waiting 26 weeks for a hip operation. Sadly, he had just found out that he had at least another 40 weeks to wait. During our meeting, it was clear that he was in pain. He was on strong medication, but his eyes watered every time he made any sort of movement that involved his hip. I am proud to be part of a Government who have put so much money into the NHS to bring waiting lists down, but given my constituent's situation, and that of many people like him, please can we have a debate in Government time on the urgent need to spend that money and get waiting lists down as quickly as possible?

Lucy Powell: The figures are shocking: over 7 million people are, like my hon. Friend's constituent, on NHS waiting lists. Behind every single one of them is a story like the one he describes—someone in pain, someone debilitated, someone unable to work or get on with their life. That is why getting the waiting lists down is one of the Government's first priorities. We have set an elective reform plan, and we want to hit the 18-week referral target by the end of this Parliament. That is incredibly ambitious. I hope that, thanks to those ambitious plans, his constituent gets the hip replacement that he desperately needs.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Ben and Amy Branson are my constituents. Their daughter Bethany was 19 when she was killed by a drunk driver on 8 November 2022. The driver crashed his van into a car and fled the scene, before skipping a red light and crashing a second time into several cars, one of which was carrying Bethany. At the scene of his arrest, the driver admitted guilt and said:

"I hope I killed someone. Oh well, you know what, I will get three, four, five years. Hopefully I killed them."

Despite his admission of guilt at the scene and there being no doubt as to his crime, he was still entitled to a one third reduction in his sentence as a result of his guilty plea, so 15 years were reduced to 10 years, and with good behaviour he could serve as little as six years and eight months in prison. Bethany's family do not believe that that reflects the severity and heartbreak of his crime. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on sentencing policy?

Lucy Powell: My heart goes out to Bethany's family. What a heartbreaking and appalling case. Every single one of us can relate to what an awful tragedy that is for the family, and how it is made worse by what seems to be a shocking injustice in how the offender was sentenced. The hon. Gentleman will know that these matters were raised many times in previous Parliaments, which strengthened sentencing, but perhaps we need to go further. A sentencing review is taking place, and the House will be updated on that. There will be further legislation, and he could raise these matters further during proceedings on it. We need to do more to reduce tragic deaths like the one that he describes, and to deter people from drink-driving and dangerous driving.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): My constituents are incredibly proud of our non-league football club, Redditch United. Led by chairman Dave Faulkner, the Valley stadium hosts thousands of young boys and girls playing football, hosts learners with special educational needs and disabilities, and is a hub for local businesses. Recently the club even secured a kit sponsorship with the Reddit r/football community. Will the Leader of the House consider a debate in Government time on how the Government can support non-league football clubs, which are so often the beating heart of local communities?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating those at Redditch United on all their work. Grassroots sport and non-league football clubs are at the heart of our communities and what we do. The Football Governance Bill will come to this House from the Lords very soon. I am sure that will be a great opportunity for him to mention the important work that Redditch United does.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): Year 4 pupils from Burnside primary school in Cramlington recently got in touch with me. In their geography lessons, they have been studying our local rivers and waterways, and they are really concerned about pollution and the difficulties created by the poor treatment of those waterways. May we have a debate on the Government's action to address those pupils' concerns by cleaning up our rivers, seas and waterways?

Lucy Powell: I know that young people, including those at Burnside school, are incredibly worried about our waterways. The pollution in our rivers and seas is absolutely unacceptable. This Government are cleaning up the mess left by the previous Government. Through the Water (Special Measures) Bill, we are taking tough action against water companies for discharge and pollution. Further measures will come soon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I chair the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. We have started the Prisoner of Conscience scheme, in collaboration with ADF International. I wish to highlight the case of Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, a musician and follower of Sufi Islamic beliefs who was arrested and sentenced to death for blasphemy in 2022. In January 2021, a higher court in Kano state overturned Sharif-Aminu's conviction. Despite that, he remains in prison and faces a retrial under laws that violate both the Nigerian constitution and international human rights standards. Nigeria is Africa's largest economy and a key UK trade partner, so will the right hon. Lady raise with her Cabinet colleagues the potential economic and business implications for international companies operating in northern Nigeria if the Supreme Court there upholds the constitutionality of blasphemy laws, and the impact that might have on investor confidence, corporate social responsibility commitments and long-term business stability?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Gentleman will know, I am sure, that the UK Government oppose the death penalty in all circumstances, including in the case that he raises. The right of individuals to express their belief or non-belief is essential to a free and open society. We have raised, and will continue to raise, those matters with the Nigerian Government. I thank him for raising them today.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Before I call the next Member, I remind the House that we need to finish in the next 15 or 20 minutes, so I would appreciate it if Members kept their questions short—as would their colleagues.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): The recent news of the loss of three bank branches in my constituency further illustrates the crisis facing communities, including in the Tyne valley, of growing banking deserts. May we have a debate in Government time about the need for access to cash, not only for older people but for those starting businesses, those purchasing houses and those who need to access face-to-face banking services, to promote growth in rural areas?

Lucy Powell: Protecting vital banking services is important for local communities like my hon. Friend's. We are accelerating the roll-out of at least 350 banking hubs, more than 100 of which are already open, and plans were announced at the end of last year to open a banking hub in his constituency.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): This week, I had the pleasure of visiting the Hertford regional college campus in Ware. I met some of its talented hairdressing apprentices and instructors, heard about how they are filling jobs at small and medium-sized enterprises in our community, and discussed HRC's apprenticeship offer to my constituents. As we mark National Apprenticeship Week, will the Leader of the House join me in celebrating Hertford and Stortford's apprentices, and will she allow for a debate in Government time on how the Government's apprenticeships and skills offer will drive growth and help to deliver our plan for change?

Lucy Powell: As my hon. Friend can see, I am particularly keen on hairdressing apprenticeships. Hairdressing is one thing that we will never be able to do on the internet, so it is a job for life for people who go down that route. He is absolutely right that we need to open up more apprenticeship opportunities to more young people. That is why, as we mark National Apprenticeship Week, we have announced changes to flexibility on maths and English requirements, which we think will open up far more opportunities for young people such as those in his constituency.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Last weekend, Renfrewshire council confirmed a case of H5N1 avian influenza at Castle Semple loch in Lochwinnoch in my constituency. That outbreak's proximity to RSPB Scotland Lochwinnoch nature reserve has raised serious concern in the local area. What steps are the UK Government taking to engage with the Scottish Government on that matter, and what action are they taking to support conservation organisations and farmers in Scotland in respect of avian flu?

Lucy Powell: The outbreaks of avian flu in recent years have been incredibly difficult for the birdkeepers on the frontline of that terrible disease. My hon. Friend will know that disease control is a devolved matter, but an animal disease policy group co-ordinates the response

across the devolved nations and with the UK Government. I will continue to ensure that she is updated on those matters.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): May we have a debate in Government time to discuss the importance of sport in the community, and particularly of sustainable community-focused programmes? That is particularly pertinent for my constituency given that the fantastic Caerau Ely AFC is taking on Connah's Quay Nomads FC in the quarter-finals of the Welsh cup on Sunday. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing Caerau Ely all the best for Sunday?

Lucy Powell: I wish Caerau Ely all the best for this weekend's game. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that grassroots sports play such an important role across our communities for young people, particularly in keeping them fit and healthy and giving them the skills for life they need, including through team sports. That is why the Government continue to be committed to grassroots sport.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): Last weekend, I went to see Dudley Town FC draw 1-1 at home against Lichfield City. Unfortunately, that "home game" was not within the constituency. In fact, Dudley has not had a stadium in the constituency for decades, despite being established in 1888. Will the Leader of the House provide Government time for a debate on grassroots football and how we can bring clubs like mine back home where they belong?

Lucy Powell: I hope that the club will one day be back in the constituency. She is right to raise such matters. Grassroots sports and football are important to the Government. That is why we are bringing forward the Football Governance Bill, among other things, and there are routes to clubs like hers getting the funding support to bring them home.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): Last week, I had the honour of visiting Unstone junior school in my constituency, and I pay tribute to the fantastic work of the staff. There was also the opportunity for some of the children to ask me questions, and a range of issues were raised, including the environment. Crucially, I was asked this question: what more can we do to support the school in providing healthy eating and, in particular, allowing the children to have watermelon and strawberries for their lunch?

Lucy Powell: I would strongly encourage the young people of my hon. Friend's constituency to have access to watermelon and strawberries for lunch. How refreshing that is, because they would certainly not be at the top of my children's list of things for lunch, so the school is obviously doing a great job on educating its young people on healthy eating.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): UK Sport-supported events generated £373 million in 2023 alone. Luton Hoo in my constituency is bidding to be a venue for the 2031 Ryder cup. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on attracting major international sporting events to the

UK as part of supporting our growth agenda, attracting local investment, providing good jobs and inspiring pride in local communities?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. England has not hosted the Ryder cup since 2002. I know that Luton Hoo has a strong bid to host it, and I wish it the very best. She is absolutely right that big sporting events bring huge amounts of regeneration, economic input, jobs and opportunities, as well as giving pride in place for constituents like hers.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): Tamworth town centre is being obliterated by roadworks that started on Monday. Staffordshire county council has not properly consulted or informed schools, businesses, residents or the borough council. A hotel has lost £700 of business in 24 hours; traffic is at a standstill; and roadworks are going through the night—my community is rightly up in arms. Can we have a statement on how the Government are holding councils to account to ensure that they are not undermining the Government's growth agenda around core administration and planning, particularly around roadworks?

Lucy Powell: This issue will be familiar to many of us in the House. Poorly carried out roadworks can cause a great deal of disruption to people and businesses, like those in my hon. Friend's constituency. I hope that her local council will have heard her call, and I encourage the council to get a grip of this project so it does not cause such disruption.

Josh MacAlister (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): Last year, the Government announced an extra £1 million for boosted antisocial-behaviour patrols across Cumbria, which was extremely welcome. Since then, we have seen a huge reduction in antisocial behaviour in those hotspots in Cleator Moor, Workington and Whitehaven. Under the leadership of the brilliant Labour police commissioner in Cumbria and the Government's support, we are putting an extra £1.7 million in for the coming year. Would the Leader of the House thank the members of the public who have come forward to report crime and share intelligence and thank the officers who have done so much to bring down crime?

Lucy Powell: I am pleased to hear that action is being taken in my hon. Friend's constituency on crime and antisocial behaviour, because it is such a blight on our communities and gets raised with us as Members of Parliament all the time. As part of our safer streets mission, the Government are committed to reducing antisocial behaviour and crime. My hon. Friend described some of the measures that we have brought in, and many more will be in the upcoming crime and policing Bill, including respect orders, dispersal orders and tough action on quad bikes.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent David Freeman is a nuclear test veteran who was deployed to Christmas island. Since he returned, he has faced a range of health issues, including cancer. He was rightly awarded the nuclear test medal, but much more needs to be done to recognise and compensate veterans like David. Like many, he has been unable to access his medical records. Will the Leader of the

House join me in thanking David and all nuclear test veterans, and will she provide time for an update on this important issue, including on medical records and compensation?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in thanking David and all our nuclear test veterans. We owe them a great debt of gratitude for what they did and what they put themselves through for this country. We are looking into the unresolved questions about the medical records. It is a priority, and I hope that the House will be updated on the matter as soon as there is something to say.

Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): I welcome the announcement that there will be a public inquiry into what led to the tragic killing of three people in Nottingham in 2023. This follows the publication of the independent mental health homicide review into the case last week. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate or statement to consider the findings of the review to ensure that, while the public inquiry takes place, important lessons are learned immediately in every part of the mental health system to prevent similar cases?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. I am sure that the whole House will join me in sending our condolences once again to the families of those who were killed in that horrific attack. The Prime Minister met those families this week, and he confirmed that a retired judge will be appointed in due course, that the process will begin to ensure there is a proper inquiry, and that the families get answers to all those unanswered questions. The details of the inquiry will be announced to Parliament in due course, and I will ensure that my hon. Friend is informed.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): Conservative-led Derbyshire county council is axing care services. At Thomas Fields care centre in Buxton, the council is cutting residential beds and dementia beds, meaning that Alan and June, who are 96 and 91, have been married for 72 years and have never been apart, will be separated. Will the Leader of the House support a debate in Government time to protect care services across Conservative-led Derbyshire and help Alan and June stay together?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear of what could happen to Alan and June—it is just unthinkable—and of the proposed closure of the care home. It will not help my hon. Friend's constituents right now, but the Government are obviously committed to sorting out the social care crisis, and that is why we have a special commission led by Baroness Louise Casey. But I hope that Derbyshire county council has heard his question and will ensure that every step is taken to ensure that his constituents can stay together in the final days of their lives.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I was pleased to support the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill on Monday to deliver on our election promise of implementing the Border Security Command, tackling the organised immigration crime gangs and bringing order to our asylum and immigration system. However, for most people, it is not possible to claim asylum from outside the UK, which means that any asylum seeker has to make their way to this country

[*Warinder Juss*]

first before they can claim asylum. That has led to many calls, including from MPs, to provide safe and legal routes for asylum seekers. Does the Leader of the House agree that after achieving border security, we need to have a debate on providing an alternative way of seeking asylum so that genuine asylum seekers do not feel the need to risk their lives crossing the channel in small, unsafe boats to claim asylum?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We do need to take further steps to secure our borders, because the levels of illegal immigration coming into this country are not acceptable. That undermines the whole system that he has described, and trust in that system, which is there for those who need it most and are fleeing persecution, or who want to make a home for themselves in this country. We will always do our bit to help those who are fleeing persecution. It is a long-standing policy that those who arrive in this country illegally are not eligible for citizenship, but I will certainly make sure that the Home Secretary keeps the House updated on these important matters.

Alison Taylor (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): Corseford college in my constituency is Scotland's only further education college for people with complex and additional needs. After an anxious few months, that college has learned that funding has been secured for the next two years. Does the Leader of the House agree that colleges such as Corseford need long-term security of funding to plan and build their support for people with complex needs in Scotland, and would she be willing to have a debate on long-term support for college services for young adults with complex and additional needs?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. Colleges such as Corseford in my hon. Friend's constituency, which provide education and support for those with complex needs, are vital for our young people, and I am sorry to hear about the uncertainty it has faced. This Government have boosted funding for colleges, but this is a devolved matter, so I hope that the Scottish Government, who have now received a significant increase to their funding, will follow suit and ensure that colleges such as Corseford are secured for the long term.

Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab): Yesterday, I hosted "Taste of Colne Valley", at which we celebrated the rich diversity of local businesses, featuring J Brindon Addy butchers, Zapato Brewing, Longley Farm and Dark Woods Coffee. People were able to come along and sample home-made sausage rolls, yoghurt, IPAs and coffee. That event emphasised how important it is to support locally run businesses in our communities, something I have long advocated. Can we have a debate in Government time to discuss the significance of supporting local businesses?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely—I am all for supporting local businesses, especially ones that serve sausage rolls and beer. I am sure we can all be encouraged to continue to do that. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: shopping local and supporting independent supports our vital high streets in communities such as his, and I am sure that we all welcome his comments.

James Asser (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): As we have heard, it is National Apprenticeship Week. In constituencies such as mine, apprenticeships are hugely important for people securing good jobs underpinned by strong skills. Given the Government's commitment to growth, supported by a lot of infrastructure projects and building, does the Leader of the House agree that we need to make sure that an apprenticeship scheme is embedded in each of those projects, so that we are building not just infrastructure but jobs and skills? Will she use her good offices to make sure that challenge is picked up across Government?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. Without apprenticeship reform, and without increasing the number of young people who can access apprenticeships, we will not be able to meet our big ambitions for house building, infrastructure and other programmes. That is why we have begun the process of reform: we have made announcements this week about functional English and maths, the Bill to establish Skills England will come before the House after we return from recess, and there are many other things that we are doing. I join my hon. Friend in that call.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): On 1 April, Tory-run Hampshire county council will remove the ability of those with disabilities to use their concessionary bus pass before 9.30 am. Multiple constituents have written to me in great distress about the impact this will have on them and their family members. One mother wrote to me to tell me how that bus pass has given her daughter, who has autism and learning difficulties, incredible opportunities and independence, including access to education. I am calling on Hampshire county council to think again. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time to debate this important issue?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear that Hampshire county council has removed the ability of disabled people to use their concessionary bus pass before 9.30 am. That decision is of great concern; it flies in the face of what that this Government—and, in fact, this country—should be seeking to do, which is to support those with disabilities to get an education, in order to help them to work. Clearly, this decision goes in the opposite direction.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Before I call Helena Dollimore to ask the final question, I would like to note that we have got 55 people in. I thank the Leader of the House very much for her persistence and her devotion to business questions.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): At a time when local news organisations are closing or being cut back, we in my constituency of Hastings, Rye and the villages are very lucky to have two fantastic independent news organisations, Rye News and the Hastings Independent Press, both of which are celebrating their 10th anniversary. They are volunteer-led, and those volunteers do a huge job, updating the community on what is going on and holding people such as myself to account. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing them a happy 10th birthday and thanking them for all their hard work?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in thanking Rye News and the Hastings Independent Press, on the occasion of their 10th anniversary, for all the amazing work they

do. She is absolutely right that local journalism—however difficult it might be at times for us as local MPs—is vital to our media and our communities in unearthing and reporting on important stories that are often missed by many.

Infected Blood Compensation Scheme

12.36 pm

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to provide an update to the House on the progress made to provide compensation to victims of the infected blood scandal.

In May 2024, the infected blood inquiry's report exposed a catalogue of failures at the systematic, collective and individual levels. Thousands of lives were needlessly lost, and too many people continue to suffer as a result of failures stretching back decades. I welcome the commitment across the House to holding the Government to account on responding to the inquiry's recommendations, and I will continue to provide regular updates on the Government's progress.

In December 2024, I published the Government's response to the infected blood inquiry. In that response, on behalf of the UK Government and working closely with the devolved Governments, I accepted either in full or in principle all 12 of the inquiry's recommendations. I will provide a further update on those recommendations in May of this year, as requested by the inquiry.

I will now update the House specifically on the inquiry's recommendation on compensation. In August 2024, I established the infected blood compensation scheme in regulations. That enabled the Infected Blood Compensation Authority to begin making compensation payments to people who are infected. I was pleased that IBCA delivered on our shared commitment to make the first compensation payments by the end of last year. That was a significant step, and the work to progress payments quickly continues as an absolute priority.

Yesterday, I laid before Parliament the draft Infected Blood Compensation Scheme Regulations 2025. As those regulations are subject to the draft affirmative procedure, there will be an opportunity for parliamentarians to debate and approve them before they become law. When laying before the House the previous regulations to establish the scheme for people who are infected and are claiming compensation under the core route, I made a commitment on the Floor of this House that those regulations would come into force by 31 March, subject to parliamentary approval. I would welcome the support of the House in approving those regulations, enabling us to deliver compensation to those who deserve it as quickly as possible.

I am fully aware of how important it is to the House, and to the many victims of this appalling scandal, that the Government provide clear and regular updates on our progress in establishing the infected blood compensation scheme. I have therefore come before the House today to explain the steps that have been taken and what they mean.

Once approved by Parliament and in force, the Infected Blood Compensation Scheme Regulations 2025 will provide IBCA with the powers it needs to begin making payments to eligible affected people. By way of a reminder, those affected include partners, parents, children, siblings and, in some instances, carers. Those people have suffered terribly from the impact of infected blood on their loved ones, and these regulations mark a significant milestone for them. The Government will do all we can to support IBCA's aim of the first compensation payments

[Nick Thomas-Symonds]

to eligible affected people being made before the end of this year, and by laying these regulations we are a step closer to achieving that aim.

As we set out in August, the infected blood compensation scheme is tariff-based. The tariffs are intended to work in a way that would be appropriate for the majority of people applying to the scheme. However, we know that the impact infected blood has on people's lives varies hugely. Each person's experience is unique and heart-breaking, and the Government recognise that there are some exceptional cases where the level of compensation offered through the core route does not sufficiently address a person's individual circumstances. For that reason, the Government have provided for higher levels of compensation for specific awards through the supplementary route, where people can demonstrate their eligibility. The regulations I have laid before Parliament set out the details of that supplementary route.

Once in force, the regulations will allow IBCA to make payments to eligible people through both the core and supplementary routes. All applicants will need to go through their initial core route assessment before applying to the supplementary route, but doing so will not delay payment of that initial core compensation offer. The regulations I have laid propose to restate and consolidate the Infected Blood Compensation Scheme Regulations 2024, which were approved by Parliament in October last year. We have done that primarily for reasons of simplicity. Having a single set of regulations that consolidates the provisions means that it has been possible to cover all compensation routes for all eligible people in a single place.

Alongside the draft regulations, yesterday we published an accompanying explanatory memorandum and equalities impact assessment. We also updated the compensation scheme explainer on gov.uk. I have heard from the community the importance of a simpler document, so I commit today to the publishing of a wider, simpler document. I have already engaged with several hon. and right hon. Members across the House in recent days, and I will continue to do so on the substance of these regulations in the coming weeks.

I would also like to welcome the progress being made in delivering compensation. In addition to the over £1 billion of interim compensation payments that have been paid so far, IBCA has now invited 113 people to claim compensation. So far, 23 offers have been made, totalling over £34 million, and 14 offers have been accepted and paid, totalling over £13 million. IBCA remains on track to invite 250 people to apply by the end of March, and it will continue to publish its monthly statistics on its website. However, this is only the beginning, and there is much more work to do.

This week, IBCA set out its plans to open the compensation service in stages to make sure it is effective and secure for all those claiming. This decision was taken independently of the Government by the IBCA board. The groups that IBCA will work through as it builds the claim service will be as follows. The first will be people who are living infected and are already registered with a support scheme. IBCA already has the details of those people through the infected blood support schemes, and it began making payments to this group in 2024. IBCA intends to accelerate the number of claims it is processing from April.

The second stage will be people making supplementary claims. The regulations I am laying provide IBCA with the ability to process these claims. As IBCA develops its service, this will allow it to process the different types of evidence needed for supplementary claims and allow people to settle their claims in full as quickly as possible. People who have registered estates are in the third group IBCA has set out. This is where an estate has already been verified as eligible for compensation through the interim payment scheme that I announced in October last year. This will ensure that significant compensation can reach multiple people, who could include both those who are infected and those who are affected.

People who are affected and linked to a registered infected person or a registered estate will be in the fourth group. If an infected person or an estate is registered, this will allow IBCA to progress an affected person's claim more quickly. The fifth group that the service will be developed for is people who are infected, but not registered with a support scheme. The sixth group will be people who are either applying on behalf of an infected person who has not previously been registered with an infected blood support scheme, or people who are affected and not linked to a registered claim. IBCA expects that it may take slightly longer to work through the claims of people who have not previously been registered for compensation.

The IBCA board assures me that this is in no way intended as a prioritisation of different claimants, but is the best way of building the service so that IBCA can get to the point where it can progress all claims as quickly as possible. Crucially, it does not mean that all claims in each group need to be finished before developing and opening the service for the next group.

IBCA has communicated its decision on its website and through the regular community update, and it has written to members of the infected blood community and right hon. and hon. Members with whom it has previously engaged to inform them of its plans. Determining these groupings is a heavy responsibility, and I am pleased that IBCA sought feedback from the infected blood community in reaching this decision. The community must, after all, be kept at the centre of all this work.

While the roll-out of the scheme is an operational decision for IBCA as an independent body, I fully support its commitment to moving forward as swiftly as possible, and I was encouraged to see the dedication of its staff and leadership in my visit to the organisation last month. As compensation applications increase, I know that IBCA is determined to ensure payments are made to people as soon as possible. I will set out more detail on this in due course, but it will include key performance indicators that IBCA will be working towards to make sure that compensation claims are dealt with effectively and efficiently. Of course, decisions on the parameters of and eligibility for the scheme remain ones for the Government, subject to parliamentary approval, as is set out in the regulations I have laid, and are not impacted by IBCA's decisions.

Let me conclude by saying that in laying these regulations, we are one step closer to having the entire infected blood compensation scheme fully established in law. I understand the importance of providing an opportunity for everyone across the House to debate this matter. This will be another significant moment for all those who have waited too long. On 30 January, I was able to

meet a number of representatives from the community to update them on the Government's plans. As ever, I found it an invaluable experience, and I am hugely grateful to those who shared their thoughts and experiences.

On my appointment to this role in July, I was determined to meet the first statutory deadline of 24 August for the first set of regulations. Over the past seven months, I have been insistent to my officials and the community on the importance of making sure that, after 40 years of injustice, justice is now finally being delivered and compensation rightly being paid. The Budget announced £11.8 billion of funding for this compensation scheme, showing the scale of this Government's commitment to concrete action. I hope parliamentarians across both Houses will support the regulations, so we can finally focus solely on delivering compensation to those who have waited for justice for far too long. I commend this statement to this House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I remind the Minister that statements should be limited to 10 minutes and that it is courteous to let the Speaker's Office know if a statement will exceed this time. The Opposition will of course be allocated additional time. I call the shadow Minister.

12.50 pm

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): I thank the Minister for his very thorough statement and for advance sight of it.

I want to start by thanking the campaigners and victims who have spent years pushing for justice for this terrible tragedy that occurred over a number of decades. The previous Conservative Government took the first steps towards recognising the horrific wrong inflicted on so many patients and their loved ones in opening and concluding the inquiry into the infected blood scandal, but particular acknowledgement must go to my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) who worked so hard when he was Paymaster General to make sure that victims and their families could at last receive some degree of justice.

I welcome the progress the Government have made since the election. Parliamentary politics inevitably focuses on division and there is plenty on which we profoundly disagree with the Government, but on this matter we speak as one. There is nothing of substance that the right hon. Gentleman and his Department are doing that is meaningfully different from what we would have done if we had still been in government. We will of course review the legislation on the next stage of the infected blood compensation scheme, but the Minister and all who are campaigning for justice can be assured that we will support the Government in their efforts.

We welcome the start of compensation payments by IBCA, but we know that victims have raised concerns about the pace of processing applications for compensation. I hope the Minister can confirm what measures he is putting in place to ensure that the processing capacity within the authority is adequate and that application processing can be sped up, because the next phase of the compensation framework will mean that applications to the authority could increase by tens of thousands. All victims and their families need to know what is being done to ensure that those claims can be processed at pace.

I am concerned by reports that only a very small fraction of those who may be eligible to claim compensation have been contacted so far; one estimate puts it as low as 0.2% of possible claimants, although I recognise that such estimates can sometimes be out of date. I hope the Minister will be able to provide some clarity on the percentage of those believed to be eligible who have been contacted so far. I know that the Minister will understand the need for the Government to communicate clearly to all who may be eligible to encourage them to apply.

That reinforces the importance that must be placed on processing claims quickly. Those who are eligible must have confidence that their claims will be accurately and quickly processed so that they receive the payment they are entitled to as soon as possible. I appreciate, of course, the staged manner in which the authority is taking claims and the need to prioritise certain claims, but I hope the Government can reiterate clearly that no one needs to worry about the capacity within the authority and the system, particularly in relation to claims that will be processed in the later stages.

I ask the Minister to offer some clarity on his assessment of whether the funding allocated so far will cover all the expected claims. We know that up to 140,000 relatives could apply for compensation as a result of the planned expansion of claim eligibility. While the Government understandably cannot provide an exact estimate of the total funding required, that would go some way to offering reassurance to victims and their families that the funding for the authority to compensate in full all who suffered harm or loss and for all the operational requirements of the authority is properly provided for.

All of us in this House understand the scale and damage of this scandal and recognise the immense efforts of victims and their families in pushing for justice, and we welcome the laying of the regulations. I conclude by repeating my assurance on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition that we will work with the Government to ensure that everyone who is eligible is aware and that they receive the compensation that they need and deserve as quickly as possible.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will make sure that your stricture about time is properly communicated across Government, Madam Deputy Speaker.

May I start by echoing the comments of the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) about my predecessor as Paymaster General, the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen), who did so much in government to push this forward? Just as I offered cross-party support when shadowing him, the continued cross-party support today is very important in respect of the speed at which we are able to push forward with the legal framework we are putting in place.

On the issue of speed, I am restless for progress. While IBCA is of course an arm's length body and has operational independence, I will none the less have more to say in due course about key performance indicators, as the House will want to continue to raise the speed of payments being made to constituents.

I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman's comments about clarity of communication. I am forever emphasising the need for simple explainer documents on what are complex regulations. Finally, the Government have already

[*Nick Thomas-Symonds*]

allocated £11.8 billion in funding for the operation of IBCA and for compensation, and we are committed to compensate all the victims of this terrible scandal.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and the progress he has made in seven months, not least on the £11.8 billion he secured in the Budget; he deserves credit for that. It is regrettable that we lost a year from Sir Brian Langstaff's second interim report in which he gave his final recommendations on compensation, stating that the Government had no reason to delay setting up the compensation process. I know my right hon. Friend is aware that there are still concerns about the tariff, particularly among those infected with hepatitis C and those who endured unethical testing. Does he agree that, while we must move ahead with all haste to get people the justice they deserve, IBCA must have flexibility in its decisions when dealing with those who feel that the tariff does not recognise the suffering they have endured?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he does as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood. Obviously the tariffs were set on the basis of the expert group chaired by Sir Jonathan Montgomery and I compliment him on the work he did in that regard. However, the tariffs and the scheme also recognise particular individual circumstances and cases that are more complex. That is why the supplemental route is being put in place. I would add that I saw when I visited IBCA—I understand that my hon. Friend will be visiting shortly—the sympathetic, compassionate approach being taken with regard to evidence, given how long ago so much of this happened.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement.

The Liberal Democrats are glad to see the introduction of this legislation and the extension of the infected blood compensation scheme. This scandal is a chilling story of people being failed not only by the medical professionals who treated them but by the NHS that should have been responsible for the safety of their treatment, and by a series of Governments who should have prevented the scandal from ever taking place.

We are glad that the new regulations will move the victims, both those infected and those affected, closer to long overdue justice. However, we are deeply concerned by the speed at which victims have been receiving compensation, with only 25 people having been invited to claim by December last year. It is right that the Government are now widening the scheme so that compensation reaches many more people as soon as possible.

It is also crucial that there are mechanisms in place to ensure that the concerns of the charities, organisations and affected individuals are heard. To that end, and to provide confidence to victims and their families, will the Minister outline a timeline for when all victims can expect to have received their long overdue compensation?

Furthermore, will the Government introduce a duty of candour on public officials so that such a scandal is never repeated?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that this scandal goes across decades and across Governments. While compensation is obviously one of the crucial recommendations, there are a total of 12 recommendations from Sir Brian Langstaff, on which I will be updating the House in due course. At present, IBCA will meet its target of 250 people by the end of next month. The approach it is taking is one of test and learn. That enables IBCA to scale up more quickly to be able to do what we all want it to do, which is to get compensation as quickly as reasonably possible to those who need it. I would expect the first payments to the affected to begin before the end of this year. Finally, on the duty of candour, which is another of Sir Brian Langstaff's recommendations, I expect to be introducing legislation to this House on that before 15 April, which, of course, is the Hillsborough anniversary.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. I want to focus on what he said about the progress being made in delivering compensation for victims and their families. I recently met a constituent of mine, Sue Sparkes, who lost her husband Les owing to infected blood in 1990. She is concerned that it will take many, many years to make all these payments. I do not doubt my right hon. Friend's commitment and passion on this issue to tackle injustice and deliver the culture change that is needed, but will he assure Sue and me that every lever of government is being pulled to ensure that all payments to infected and affected individuals are made as a matter of urgency?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I can certainly give that assurance both to my hon. Friend and to his constituent, Sue. The Government will continue to push this forward as quickly as is reasonably possible. I am conscious of the strength of feeling, and I am also conscious that victims have waited decades for justice, and that need for speed is recognised across Government.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Every Member of this House should welcome this statement, as I certainly do, as there is no greater horror imaginable than becoming chronically sick as a result of what ought to be a routine medical procedure—a blood transfusion. Will the right hon. Gentleman, following on from the previous question, ensure that these matters are dealt with promptly? Will he reflect on what the report into these matters describes as institutional failures? The National Audit Office looked at compensation for a range of scandals and concluded:

“There is no central coordinated approach when government sets up new compensation schemes resulting in a relatively slow, ad-hoc approach.”

The report recommended that the Cabinet Office reviews its arrangements to

“allow compensation schemes to begin and operate in a more timely...and effective manner”.

When the Minister returns to the House, will he reflect on that recommendation and perhaps say to the House what the Government will do in response?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The right hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point, and what is crucial, whether it is this compensation scheme or others that have been run by Government, is that we learn the lessons between the different compensation schemes and we learn best practice. I absolutely agree with him that that is crucial with this compensation scheme, too.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. Brian Heatlie, a haemophiliac, was given infected blood products in 1982 at the age of five. As a result, he died in 1996 at the age of 18. His devoted parents, Lynda and James, from New Mills in my constituency of High Peak, have been waiting 28 years for compensation, and they are now in their 70s. Can the Minister confirm that the new regulations will mean that it may be possible for victims who have lost loved ones in this scandal, such as Lynda and James, to receive both their own compensation and compensation for the estate of their loved ones?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I think I speak for the whole House in sending our sympathies to Lynda and James for the indescribable sense of loss and the experience that they have been through over so many years. The answer to my hon. Friend's question is yes. These consolidated regulations are for the estates of infected people, but also for the affected, too. But I know, and the whole House would agree, that no amount of money can make up for that awful experience.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister most sincerely for his statement. Nobody in the House is not reassured by what he has said. He also referred to the regional Administrations and how this will affect them, and he has had those discussions with them. There are reports today that only 0.2% of eligible family members have been contacted about the scheme, and there are concerns that the scheme does not have the capacity to cope with the numbers of potential applicants. Can the Minister outline how he will ensure that there is capacity for all those families to have a sense of recognition and to be definite about a form of restitution?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: First, in terms of numbers, as I indicated, IBCA is operating a test and learn approach that then allows it to scale up. It will scale up its capacity alongside that, to ensure that it has the capacity it requires to process the claims. As I indicated, I visited IBCA last month. I can already see that scaling up starting to take place, and the hon. Member can certainly give assurance to his constituents that the Government will continue to do all we can to ensure the swift delivery of compensation.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for today's update. My West Dunbartonshire constituent, Fiona, was infected with hepatitis B following blood transfusions in 1954 and 1985. Fiona is apparently not entitled to any form of support or compensation payment because of missing medical records and because of receiving a transfusion both before and after the 1972 cut-off relating to screening for hepatitis B. Will the Minister agree to meet my constituent and me to discuss this matter and ensure that she and others affected in similar circumstances—apparently a small number—can receive compensation and justice under this Labour Government?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Generally, with regard to evidence, the Infected Blood Compensation Authority has said that when an individual is invited to make their claim, it will aim to gather some of the information, including medical records and information about an applicant's condition and severity, from organisations that already have it. That should mean that those claiming will be asked for the least amount of information possible. I know that IBCA is currently considering what guidance can be provided for people ahead of making a claim. On the specific case of my hon. Friend's constituent, Fiona, if he sends me the details, I am more than happy to look into it.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I thank the Minister for the thoroughness and thoughtfulness with which he has made his statement? I think he would agree that there are still issues around speed, quantum, flexibility and care. Am I right in thinking that IBCA does not have any flexibility about the amount of damages paid? If so, can he give a rough indication of what sort of compensation is paid when someone has lost their life as a result of being poisoned by the NHS? Is it the case that people have to make an individual settlement and agreement on what they will accept? If so, is there any professional support that someone, who might be quite ill, can get before signing on the dotted line and possibly signing away their rights to more compensation than they might otherwise receive?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On the right hon. Gentleman's point about tariffs, they have been set out and published. There are then assessments to be made about severity within the tariff bands. There is also, as I have indicated, the supplementary route for more complex cases. I cannot give him a single figure across these cases as they obviously vary, but the House will gradually see the overall amount being published by IBCA.

On the right hon. Gentleman's second point, a victim making an application to the IBCA will be given a particular claim manager—I met the first claim managers only in recent weeks—to speak to and guide them through the process, which is crucial. I know that the culture imbued by Sir Robert Francis is an enabling one about helping victims, particularly with evidence. I have also signed off both legal support and financial support, because it is about receiving what are, in many cases, life-changing sums of money.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): May I first thank my right hon. Friend for the update? Despite his sterling efforts—I really mean that—the process has taken far too long. Victims are dying at the rate of two per week, never having seen the compensation they deserve. Victims are very much unaware of, and desperate to understand, what and how much compensation they might even be due under the process.

Can the Minister say how many of the 5,000 infected victims will be invited to apply to the scheme during 2025? Has he considered, or is there potential to consider, allowing victims to take support scheme payments as a lump sum without any reductions?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On people's having a sense of the amount of money they will get, the Government published explainer documents in August last year—and

[Nick Thomas-Symonds]

in recent days—that are on the Government website. The Infected Blood Compensation Authority is intending to publish a compensation calculator for the infected core award by the end of March.

On my hon. Friend's other points, the number of victims paid will be regularly published by the IBCA during the course of the year. The payments to the infected have started, and I expect payments to the affected to begin before the end of the year. As regards the support schemes, one change that the Government made was to allow both a lump sum payment and the continuation of the support schemes. That came through from the consultation that Sir Robert Francis undertook during the general election campaign. I have made that change to the scheme, and how that works precisely is set out in the explainer document.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I am grateful to the Paymaster General for the update; indeed, I am grateful that he has given several updates to the House. My North East Fife constituent was infected a number of years ago and involved in the campaign for a long time. He has shared concerns about the evidential standard expected of claimants, particularly in relation to medical records. Indeed, his lawyers have told me that they have concerns that case managers are not correctly interpreting the initial date of infection because medical records are not available to substantiate that. They also have concerns that the Australia antigen has not been properly understood as an indicator of HBV. Is the Paymaster General aware of those concerns? Can he comment on them?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The hon. Lady is entirely right to raise the issue of evidence. There is the specific issue that she referred to, but there is also a far more general problem about incidents often being from a long time ago. We also know that in some cases there was deliberate destruction of records. The level of evidence is therefore clearly a significant issue. As I have indicated, when I visited the IBCA, I heard from claim managers about the approach they are taking and the culture that is being imbued—an enabling culture—and about how the IBCA will aim to gather some of the information to assist victims, which I think will be a vital part of the process.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and his commitment to this issue. Will he say a little more about how he is working with colleagues in Scotland to drive forward the final compensation scheme? I share the concerns already expressed by hon. Members across the House about the need for speed in ensuring that victims receive the compensation that they so rightly deserve.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I assure my hon. Friend that I work closely with the devolved Administrations on the issue of compensation. There is a broader point as well: events that took place in the 1970s, 1980s and beyond occurred in the pre-devolution age. Over the next few months, as we look to implement the rest of Sir Brian Langstaff's recommendations, partnership work with the devolved Administrations will become even more important.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I thank the Paymaster General for an advance copy of his statement. I recognise his sincerity, and the hard work that he and his colleagues are putting into progressing this vital compensation scheme. I also understand the need for him and his colleagues to take small initial steps to test their systems and processes, but as others have said, legal representatives fear that many will die while they wait, and justice delayed is justice denied. Does he really think that is good enough, given the numbers involved? Will he consider strengthening the authority's teams who are processing these claims, so that the pace can be rapidly accelerated, and so that they can meet the forthcoming key performance indicators to which he referred? Finally, the last time we spoke about the scheme in the Chamber, he undertook to look at the role of voluntary organisations that provide vital support to claimants, and to consider putting funding for them on a statutory basis. Will he comment on that as well, please?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On the hon. Gentleman's first point, he mentioned me and my colleagues, but of course IBCA is an arm's length body—it is operationally independent—so it takes operationally independent decisions on how best to pay out the money to as many people as possible, as quickly as possible. As I said, it has decided to adopt a test-and-learn approach to make that possible.

One of Sir Brian Langstaff's recommendations is that we look at support for voluntary organisations. That will be covered in an update that I will give to the House in due course on all 12 recommendations. However, I give the hon. Gentleman the general assurance that I am, and will continue to be, restless for progress. On his point about IBCA scaling up and having more staff and claims managers, that is precisely what it is doing at the moment.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and update. In Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages, I have a constituent, Janet, who is in her 80s. She tragically lost her first and second husband to infected blood, and she is due to receive compensation as their next of kin. She would like to ensure that she can pass the payments on to their children, who, as the Minister rightly said, are victims, too. However, she has been advised that if that happened, it would constitute a secondary transfer and be subject to inheritance tax. We are talking about people who lost their father and stepfather to this issue. Will he meet me to explore whether a solution can be found in these cases?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: First, I should say for clarity that all IBCA payments made to those in the UK will be exempt from income tax, capital gains tax and inheritance tax. Anyone who is in direct receipt of compensation from IBCA, or is a beneficiary of an estate to which compensation was paid on behalf of the deceased, does not need to pay income tax, capital gains tax or inheritance tax on the amount that they receive. I am aware of the concern that my hon. Friend is talking about; that is a slightly different situation. If she writes to me with the details of the case, I will be more than happy to look into it.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I thank the Paymaster General not only for his statement, but for the clarity and commitment in his answers. As he may

remember from previous occasions in the Chamber, I have the personal experience of having lost a very close family friend in the 1990s who was a victim of this. His widow died without compensation, and his children are now among those waiting to hear what will happen. I thank the Minister for his application and commitment, but as others have mentioned, there remains the issue of speed and best practice going forward. He mentioned that he will simplify the process. Can we have updates from him in future on what the Government are doing to examine best practice, and how can future victims of such scandals be assured that they will not have to wait as long as 40 years?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: As on the last occasion, I express my sympathies to the hon. Lady for the loss of her family friend back in the 1990s. Of course, I am always looking to share best practice, as I said a moment ago to the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), who is no longer in his place. That is vital. I can also give the hon. Lady the undertaking that I will continue to update this House, as I hope right hon. and hon. Members have seen me do over the past seven months. There will also be a debate on the regulations. I will have to give an update on the 12 recommendations from Sir Brian Langstaff by the May deadline, but IBCA will also provide regular updates via our newsletter, and I refer her to those as well.

Point of Order: Rectification Procedure

1.20 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I would like to apologise to the House for failing to declare an interest when tabling a written parliamentary question to the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology on 24 April 2024, and then when tabling a written parliamentary question to the Deputy Foreign Secretary on 13 May 2024. When I tabled these questions, I inadvertently failed to declare two interests: a reception at the Labour party conference that was sponsored by the high commission of India, and a visit to India that was funded by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry. This was in breach of the rules, and I apologise to the House for this error.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. There will be no further points of order on that issue.

BILL PRESENTED

CHURCH OF SCOTLAND
(LORD HIGH COMMISSIONER) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Pat McFadden, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Angela Rayner, Secretary Ian Murray, Secretary Bridget Phillipson and Nick Thomas-Symonds, presented a Bill to make provision for persons of the Roman Catholic faith to be eligible to hold the office of His Majesty's High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 24 February, and to be printed (Bill 185) with explanatory notes (Bill 185-EN).

LGBT+ History Month

1.22 pm

The Minister for Equalities (Dame Nia Griffith): I beg to move,

That this House has considered LGBT+ History Month.

For most people under the age of 40, it is almost impossible to imagine a society in which LGBT+ people were not visible and integrated. Most, if not all, of us have LGBT+ family, friends and colleagues; in this Chamber, one in 10 Members identifies as LGBT+, a world record for any Parliament, as far as we know. Yet it was not long ago that LGBT+ people were either invisible or villainised. If an LGBT+ person was hospitalised, their partner was not recognised as next of kin. Trans people on TV were confined to clichés and offensive stereotypes. According to the papers, LGBT+ people were deviants to be feared.

That British society is now largely a welcoming place for LGBT+ people is due to the tireless and patient efforts of countless individuals and groups, from the early efforts of campaigners in the 1950s, quietly seeking the recommendations of Lord Wolfenden and seeing them made into law, to the loud protests against section 28 in the 1980s and the moving fight for marriage equality in the 2010s. These people have not only driven change, but enriched our society.

The Stonewall riots in America were a landmark moment in the global fight for LGBT+ equality. From then on, unapologetic visibility and authenticity would be the banner under which LGBT+ people would organise. Those lessons were learned, and were adapted to the UK, where we have our own history of struggle for LGBT+ equality. Our first Pride march was held in 1972, when a few hundred brave souls wound their way from Hyde Park to Trafalgar Square. The trepidation those individuals must have experienced may be hard for many of us today to imagine; yet alongside their trepidation, there must also have been a strong sense of action, achievement and community.

It was undoubtedly that sense of community that played a part in one of the more colourful moments in our history. Some 37 years ago, in this very building, in an inverse of “It’s Raining Men”, a number of lesbians abseiled their way from the Public Gallery on to the Benches of the other place in protest against the passing of section 28. Back in Wales, in the area my family is from, the traditional mining communities of the Neath, Swansea and Dulais valleys were perhaps somewhat bemused to be supported financially and morally during the miners’ strike of 1984 by Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners; in turn, they were repaid by the legendary friendship and loyalty of many of those in the mining communities in 1985, when the miners showed their support by joining the Pride marches in Cardiff and London.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her incredible speech and for her commitment to this House. I know of my hon. Friend’s journey when she was a teacher. Does she agree that it is important for allies to stick together and fight for other people’s rights, as well as our own, if we are truly to move forward with recognising and appreciating people and allowing them to be their authentic selves?

Dame Nia Griffith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we have to stick together in the fight for rights. I know she has been a fantastic ally of the LGBT+ community.

I am proud to say that the history of LGBT+ rights in this country is intertwined with the history of Labour in government. It was a Labour Government who decriminalised homosexuality in 1967, and a Labour Government who equalised the age of consent in 2000 and repealed the hateful section 28 in 2003. It was a Labour Government who lifted the ban on LGBT+ people serving in the armed forces; created the Gender Recognition Act 2004; pioneered civil partnerships; introduced laws to allow unmarried couples, including same-sex couples, to apply for adoption; and laid down the landmark Equality Act 2010. With each milestone, consensus emerged across the political spectrum that LGBT+ people deserve protection, recognition and opportunity. LGBT+ people were finally viewed as just that: people.

Even the Conservative party, long opposed to much of what I have just outlined, began to change its view. It was, after all, a Conservative Prime Minister, in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, who introduced same-sex marriage into law, albeit heavily dependent on Labour votes. On that point, I give a special thanks to Baroness Featherstone, the then Liberal Democrat Equalities Minister who pushed through the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 with tireless effort.

However, in recent years, that consensus has begun to fray. Increasingly, voices across society and this Chamber are pushing division, anxiety and apprehension. While the tone of debate on LGBT+ rights has always been contentious, the level of toxicity has perhaps never been so intense. Our answer to this must be to lead by example and conduct ourselves in measured, considered and respectful language. It is vital that we—regardless of party or position—promote a tone and quality of debate that, while at times may provoke impassioned disagreement, refuses to lower itself to the politics of division and anxiety.

For decades, Labour in government has sought to advance the rights, protections and opportunities of LGBT+ people, and this Government are no different. Take, for example, conversion practices. We know that they are abuse, that they do not work and that they leave a legacy of painful memories and lasting mental health problems. The previous Government did nothing to ban this abhorrent practice—this Government will be different. That is why we committed to publishing draft legislation in the King’s Speech, detailing our plan to introduce a fully trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices. Of course, while it is important that we protect people from these abusive practices, the Government have been clear that any ban must not cover legitimate psychological support, treatment or non-directive counselling. It must also respect the important role that teachers, religious leaders, parents and carers can play in supporting those exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity.

In our manifesto, we also committed to modernising, simplifying and reforming gender recognition law while upholding the Equality Act and its provisions on single-sex exceptions. We will remove indignities for trans people, who deserve support and acceptance, while retaining

the need for a diagnosis of gender dysphoria from a specialist doctor. We will set out our next steps on this work in due course.

I want to touch on the important work this Government are undertaking around sexual health. Everyone in this House today is aware of the terrible toll that HIV and AIDS took upon the LGBT+ community during the 1980s and '90s. During this time, thousands of young gay and bisexual men and trans people lost their lives. Since then, attitudes have changed through the work of so many courageous individuals. Many of us remember the courage of the then MP for Islington and South Finsbury, Chris, now Lord, Smith. Already the first openly gay MP, in 2005 he announced his HIV-positive status, becoming the first Member of this House to acknowledge their diagnosis.

As set out in our manifesto, HIV is a key priority for the Government, and we have commissioned a new plan to end HIV transmissions in England by 2030. We have shown our commitment to that. Just this week, the Prime Minister showed us all how easy and quick an HIV test can be. Back in November, the Prime Minister confirmed £27 million of additional funding to expand the highly successful NHS emergency department opt-out HIV testing programme. In regard to opt-out testing, we know it works well and is able to reach those who are less likely to engage with sexual health services. During the past 27 months, over 2 million HIV tests have been conducted through the programme.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I was not going to intervene on that point, but I was reminded of my Uncle Stephen who sadly passed away in the '90s following a positive HIV diagnosis and I wanted to take this opportunity to mention him in this place. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] Thank you. Does the Minister agree that it is so important that we end the stigma around HIV to support more people, so that people like my Uncle Stephen do not have their lives ended prematurely?

Dame Nia Griffith: I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning a very, very personal experience of the terrible losses we saw in the 1980s and 1990s. He is absolutely right. From those very first moments, when we were perhaps fearful to be the first person to wear the red ribbon on 1 December, we can now hopefully combat that stigma. But we know there is still a lot to do worldwide to combat stigma and ensure people get the treatments that are available.

Last week, I had the privilege to visit Fast Track Cymru in Cardiff and hear about the innovative work it is doing to eradicate the transmission of HIV, including the test and post service now available in Wales.

Before I move on to issues relating to trans and gender-questioning youth, I am sure I do not need to remind Members of my earlier words urging measured, considered and respectful debate. I am pleased to confirm that NHS England has opened three children and young people's gender services, in the north-west, London and Bristol. The services operate under an innovative model and embed multidisciplinary teams in specialist children's hospitals. The services have begun seeing patients from the national waiting list. A fourth service will open in the east of England in spring. NHS England remains on schedule to deliver a gender clinic in each region of England by 2026.

On puberty blockers, I am aware of the views of many on the subject and how sensitive it can be. In March last year, NHS England took the decision not to commission the routine use of puberty blockers for the treatment of gender incongruence, informed by an evidence review conducted by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. The findings were echoed in the Cass review and in accompanying systematic reviews conducted by the University of York, which found insufficient evidence to support the safety or clinical effectiveness of puberty blockers for adolescents. There is a clear time for this order to be reviewed in 2027. Better-quality evidence is critical if the NHS is to provide reliable transparent information and advice to support children and young people, and their parents and carers, in making potentially life-changing decisions. That is why we are supporting NHS England to set up a study into the impacts of puberty-suppressing hormones as a treatment option for children and young people with gender incongruence. The trial aims to begin recruiting participants in spring 2025.

On education, as many are aware, before venturing into politics I was, by profession, a comprehensive school teacher. Back in the '80s, section 28, introduced into law by the then Conservative Government, banned the "promotion of homosexuality" or

"the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship."

In the classroom, if a pupil was verbally being hateful or discriminatory towards one of their peers, I did not want it to go unchallenged but found myself just telling them not to use such language or risk upsetting someone. Anything more explicit could have been potentially promoting homosexuality and breaking the law, and risked me losing my job. I did not protect those pupils who were the object of such comments in the way that they should have been protected. I should have done more. Today, the notion that an LGBT+ family is pretend is absurd to most. Nowadays, it is not uncommon to find same-sex parents picking up their children from school.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): I appreciate the Minister's apology, but to have taken such a stance would have meant her losing her job. Although we can always reflect and do better in hindsight, we have to be kind to ourselves and give ourselves the space to be able to see the grace in ourselves as well.

Dame Nia Griffith: I thank my hon. Friend for her very kind comments on the issue.

Even today, it does not mean that there are no challenges. Coming out, particularly to family or classmates, is still challenging and scary, with all the worry of how it might be perceived and the fear of bullying.

In 2018, the previous Government introduced LGBT+ people into the relationships, sex and health education curriculum. The reality of diverse family types would, in stark contrast to section 28, be taught as a fact of life in modern Britain. As the House is aware, the RSHE and gender-questioning pupil guidance is currently under review. The Government are engaging with stakeholders, including parents, teachers and pupils. The Government are also drawing from the available evidence, including the Cass review, to finalise the guidance. As the Secretary of State for Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson),

[*Dame Nia Griffith*]

said in her first month in office, children's wellbeing must be at the heart of any decisions on RSHE and gender-questioning guidance.

Another area I wish to touch on today is LGBT+ veterans and personnel in the armed forces. In 2021, Falklands veteran Major General Alastair Bruce married his husband in full military regalia. It was celebrated in regional and national media, yet when he joined the Army in 1979 it was illegal to be both LGBT+ and a member of our armed forces. As a result, the general was forced to hide part of himself for decades just to be afforded the right to serve his country. It was not until 2000 that that harmful policy was rectified, so that ability, not identity, determines if one is able to serve their country. In 2023, Lord Etherton delivered the results and recommendations of his independent review into the period of the ban on LGBT+ personnel. Just this week, at an event to mark 25 years since its lifting, I heard some of the harrowing stories of those affected by that ban.

The Government are committed to delivering in full the recommendations of Lord Etherton's review. Only last month, the winning design for a new LGBT+ memorial for armed forces personnel was unveiled, soon to be housed at the National Arboretum. In December, the Ministry of Defence detailed to the House a financial redress scheme that seeks to acknowledge the consequences of the ban. The Government have increased the financial redress scheme from the original £50 million allocated by the previous Government to £75 million, an increase of 50%. I strongly urge any eligible veterans from that time to contact the scheme as soon as they are able.

More widely, 10 years ago the United Kingdom was ranked as the No. 1 nation in Europe for LGBT+ rights, protections and safety. The UK was a global example not only of acceptance but opportunity. But 10 years of subsequent Conservative Governments has undermined that achievement. From shelving their own LGBT action plan to the embarrassing boycott of their own international LGBT conference and the flip-flopping and delays on banning conversion practices, the Conservative party slid backwards towards the politics of division. This Government aim to reverse that trend. The UK is proud to defend the human rights of LGBT+ people at home and around the world. We are proud members of the Equal Rights Coalition, which is an intergovernmental organisation dedicated to the protection of rights for LGBT+ people. The UK believes that human rights are universal and apply equally to all people. That includes those who are LGBT+, who are some of the most systematically persecuted individuals in the world. Currently, 63 countries criminalise consensual same-sex acts, 13 can impose the death penalty, and at least 49 use legislation to criminalise or harass transgender and gender-diverse people.

The criminalisation of LGBT+ people often stems from colonial-era legislation, much of it imposed by the UK itself. These laws uphold outdated views that undermine the rights of LGBT+ people. They were wrong then, and they are wrong now. Our network of more than 280 diplomatic missions works to tackle discrimination and end the violence and persecution that persist today. Our £40 million programme is helping to improve political, social and economic empowerment by addressing outdated, discriminatory laws, promoting protective legislation, enabling civil society organisations, and supporting the most vulnerable LGBT+ people in conflict and crisis.

Today I have shared the Government's commitments in detail. This Government stand ready to deliver for LGBT+ people, ending the dithering of recent years and lowering the temperature of toxic debate. Let me end by saying, as part of the LGBT+ community myself and as the Minister for Equalities, that it is a privilege to open this debate, and I look forward to the contributions of Members on both sides of the House.

1.41 pm

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): It is always a pleasure to stand at the Dispatch Box on behalf of his Majesty's loyal Opposition, but I particularly welcome the chance to take part in this debate during LGBT+ History Month, which was first celebrated in 2005 and has been celebrated every February since then—I wish it a very happy 20th birthday. I welcomed the Minister's opening speech, and, in particular, her updates on the Cass review of how we support young people and their parents and carers.

The theme of this year's LGBT+ History Month is activism and social change, and it is very pleasing that some Members are currently in Westminster Hall debating National HIV Testing Week. As we have heard, in the last few decades some truly remarkable men and women have fought successfully for social change and, more substantially, a complete sea change in social attitudes to LGBT+ people—such a change, indeed, that in 2019, under the Conservatives, Alan Turing was pictured on the £50 note. What progress! The fact that we are now rightly, properly and joyfully able to celebrate gay marriage is another huge step forward, and, as we heard from the Minister, as a country we have apologised and worked to compensate our LGBT+ veterans, who have been treated abominably in the service of our country. The fact we can celebrate those individuals in history properly, rather than seeing what they saw—the shameful treatment that they received—and the fact that Alan Turing has been rightly celebrated show just how much we have moved on. Like, I am sure, many other Members who are present today, I have met constituents who have been affected by that ban, and we welcome both the memorial and the redress scheme.

Nowhere have we seen more change in the past 40 years than in the battle on HIV and AIDS. When I was first appointed to my role as shadow Minister for Women and Equalities, one of my first meetings was with representatives of the wonderful Terrence Higgins Trust. Terry Higgins was one of the first people in the UK to die of an AIDS-related illness, and the trust that bears his name was set up with the intention of preventing others from having to suffer in the way in which he had. It focused on raising funds for research and awareness of the illness which at the time was called gay-related immune deficiency, or GRID—the name itself was a marker of prejudice at the time. The trust was the first charity in the UK to be set up in response to the HIV epidemic, and has been at the forefront of the fight against HIV and AIDS ever since. As we heard from the Minister, this charity is just one of the groups that have driven real, positive change. We are proud and thankful to them all for the work that they have done, then and now.

Dawn Butler: I am reminded of my first experience of training with the Terrence Higgins Trust, learning about HIV and how it could be contracted. What stuck in my

mind the most was people saying that it could be caught from saliva. I remember those at the trust saying that to catch it someone would need 2 litres of saliva, like a big bottle of fizzy drink; that is one hell of a sloppy kiss. Does the hon. Member agree that education is key, and that the trust does an amazing job?

Mims Davies: Absolutely. I thank the hon. Lady, with whom I have the pleasure of co-chairing the all-party parliamentary group on women in Parliament. These stigmas, these mindsets, these myths have divided people and made life more difficult because of a lack of understanding and the promotion of fear, and I am very pleased that we have been able to tackle them through the work of that wonderful charity and many others. It was a pleasure to meet representatives of the Terrence Higgins Trust recently.

The Minister mentioned wider sexual health, and, as a mum of two young daughters, I know of the continuing need to meet the wider sexual health challenges facing our young people. We also need to meet the target of ending new HIV cases by 2030. I was honoured to be asked to speak at the Terrence Higgins Trust event during last year's Conservative party conference, alongside my right hon. Friends the Members for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) and for Daventry (Stuart Andrew). We all spoke about the progress being made and the commitment to doing what still needs to be done to deliver the ambition of ending HIV cases by 2030 and tackling the stigma. We in the Opposition will work stridently with the Government to achieve that aim, because this truly is a cross-party, cross-community issue.

The last Conservative Government legalised self-testing kits for HIV in 2014, self-testing was rolled out in England in 2015, and the trial of pre-exposure prophylaxis in England began in 2017. This is National HIV Testing Week, and I am proud to say that, in 2012, it was the Conservatives who funded the first one ever. I have three kits in my office to do exactly what we should all be doing: I shall be handing them out and doing a test myself to show how easy it is.

Any Member who, like me, represents a rural area will know that gaining access to healthcare can involve challenges—for instance, getting the message out about safe sex, access to contraception and regular testing, and the additional logistics involved in being a young person living in a rural area. Those challenges need to be understood. Many of my constituents in East Grinstead, Uckfield and the villages have to travel many miles to Brighton or Crawley to get a test. For my younger constituents, the problems may relate to a lack of transport or connectivity, isolation or loneliness, or simply not having anyone to talk to. I would encourage people to sign up for a test online and have a kit delivered to their door, as that may be easier and more appropriate. I say to my young constituents: “As your MP, I am a champion for you, and I hope that you are feeling supported by me. I am here to listen to you and stand up for your equality.” I am sure that all Members will feel the same.

Over the last few years, both in the civil service when I served as the Minister and in Parliament, I have enjoyed and often learned a lot from working with my friends and colleagues who are LGBT+, and I have been humbled by their bravery. It is often still too hard for people to speak up about the person they are and to be their true, authentic self. I will champion the right of my staff and my friends, as I am sure all of us in this

House will, to have the opportunity to be their true, authentic self, because the truest conservative beliefs are those of freedom, equality, liberty and opportunity for all.

In October, at Women and Equalities questions, I asked the Minister for Women and Equalities whether the previous Government's £20 million commitment to rolling out the successful HIV and hepatitis testing programme will remain. I was pleased when she responded by saying that officials are working up plans. If there is anything further that can be shared with the House today, I would welcome that. I also welcomed the update on the RHSE guidance, which is under review. It is important that parents and loved ones know what is being discussed at school, so that they can discuss and support that at home. Given the discussion this afternoon, that is all the more important.

Public health commissioners are responsible for local sexual health services, including the 2.3% cash increase last year. I hope the Minister will agree that we must ensure we see the delivery of progress and outcomes for those who need that support in our communities, not least because there are worrying statistics from the UK Health Security Agency showing an increase in HIV infections among heterosexual men and that, all too often, there is unsafe sex taking place, which we know puts some people at risk. Having the ability to ask people to test, so that they can have safe sex, is vital—as much as consent.

In the best traditions of this House, one Government builds on the legacy of the previous one. I am very proud of the work we did to ensure that anti-bullying schemes were rolled out for students in 2012, to support LGBT+ students. I welcome what the Minister said—bravery comes in every shape and form, and I thank her for sharing her challenges with us. We are all learning together, and I am delighted to support this debate.

In 2017, the first ever LGBT+ survey of the population was undertaken under the Conservatives. There were many other steps forward, and we must continue in the tradition of challenging and tackling stigma, to reach further important goals. As a responsible Opposition, we must scrutinise and encourage, to make sure we are all moving positively in the right direction.

I look forward to hearing contributions from other Members today, as we continue to stand up for all our constituents, to challenge prejudice, to deliver true equality of opportunity, to celebrate love for all in the memory of and on behalf of those who have led the way, and to continue to deliver for all our constituents whose happiness, success and rights matter to us all.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee.

1.53 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): It is always an honour to take part in this annual debate commemorating, celebrating and protesting for LGBT+ History Month. I will start by saying that I am incredibly disappointed that there are not more Members of the House present to hear what I know will be a really informative, heartfelt, genuine debate.

The theme for LGBT+ History Month this year is activism and social change, but given what the LGBTQIA+ community is facing at the moment in the media and in

[Sarah Owen]

political rhetoric, perhaps a more appropriate theme would be survival and existence. We see powerful people—rich people—at home and abroad punching down, referring to the LGBT community as woke, snowflake, weak and fragile. Any of us know that the LGBTQIA+ community is far from all those things, because fighting for who you are and to love who you want to love in the face of hatred, humiliation and persecution is one of the bravest things any of us could ever do. The trans community have to live every day in a body that does not reflect who they truly are—that is courage, and all against a backdrop of conversations about them, without them, particularly for trans men.

Some of the strongest, least snowflake people I could ever have in my life are from the LGBT community. I am so proud to call them my friends. They are basically my extended family; they are the family I chose. They fight to be who they are, and they fight to exist now. I am going to give some personal examples from when I was perhaps at my weakest. As a straight woman, I relied on that community and my friends to hold me up, because they had the strength when I did not.

When I was in my 20s, I used to go out out—as Miley Cyrus says, I used to be young. On one night, I was out out with one of my gay best friends and my non-binary friend. We had gone to a gay club because, unsurprisingly, and for a reason that I cannot possibly put my finger on, I felt safer and able to have more fun in gay nightclubs than I did in straight clubs as a 20-year-old single woman of that time. I cannot think why that might be. We were on our way home, and we wanted chips and a kebab—standard, right? In the queue was a group of lads. They start giving me abuse, with sexual connotations, and me being myself, I did not shut up; I did not take that lying down. I gave as good as I was getting.

They went ahead, and all of a sudden, when we came out with our chips and kebabs, I could feel things hitting my head. They were throwing chips at us. Those chips suddenly became punches to my face, and they pushed me to the ground. Who stood up and fought for me? My gay best friends and my non-binary friend took on five blokes for me—I did not stop fighting either, but they were there when I needed them.

I have worked across different communities on various campaigns, particularly human rights campaigns, and when I have lost those campaigns, my dearest friend Paul has been there to pick me up when I was crying and broken and thought I could not carry on. He showed me the importance of that, because of his experiences of fighting for equality throughout the '80s and the '90s and, unfortunately, in 2025.

My dearest friend Helgi was one of the first out LGBT council members of the Royal College of Anaesthetists. I have spoken quite often in this place about the multiple miscarriages I have experienced. I could not have found myself at a darker time than I did then. He was there in the surgery to hold my hand and help me through one of the most difficult procedures, to remove two of the babies that did not make it out. He was my friend and was there when I woke up.

That is the strength of the community. That is the strength of allyship. Right now, they are the ones being attacked. They are the ones feeling isolated. They are

the ones feeling without hope. So I make a plea to every ally and to everybody to use their voice to stand up for the many who have used their voices to stand up for our rights, our dignity and our future.

We had an election last year, and I am so proud that my first official engagement was Pride in Luton. Every year it gets bigger and better, and there are more supporters, more attendees and more fun. I took my family with me, and my then four-year-old asked me, "What's Pride, mummy?" I said, "Pride is a celebration, but it's also a protest. She said, "Okay." I said, "Pride is a protest and a celebration of people loving who they want to love and being who they are." Her reaction was, "Okay," and she shrugged. We had the best time ever, and I hope that Pride long continues.

But we did not get here without a fight. Over a decade ago, the previous Labour Government introduced some fantastic measures: they removed the terrible section 28 from the statute book; passed a law allowing trans people to legally change their gender; and introduced the Equality Act to protect LGBT+ people from discrimination. Labour also lifted the ban on lesbians, gay men and bi people serving in the armed forces; introduced civil partnerships, which—I give credit to the previous Conservative Government—paved the way for same-sex marriage; and brought in laws to allow unmarried couples, including same-sex couples, to apply for joint adoption. I am pleased that we have that legacy and foundation to build on, but build on it we must.

The plan proposed in the Labour manifesto was to deliver a trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices. I am pleased that the Minister confirmed at the Women and Equalities Committee yesterday that the ban will be trans inclusive. She gave her commitment on that.

We need to ensure that LGBT+ hate crime constitutes an aggravated offence in the same way as other hate crime offences. We need to bring forward a new HIV action plan, and I am glad that many hon. Members have spoken about that already. We need to right the wrongs endured by LGBT+ veterans, which I know this Government are taking aim at; modernise the law on gender recognition; fix the NHS; and recruit 8,500 more mental health workers. All those are brave and laudable aims, but one thing that has been missing is a timeframe—a schedule for when all these fantastic plans will be put into place. When will the LGBTQIA+ community be able to feel the benefits of these laudable and beneficial aims? We have seen many members of that community feeling scared. It is not just about looking across the pond and seeing that their existence has been completely wiped out by President Trump and the richest man in the world; there is also a feeling that there is a rowing back in the UK. I want us to address some of the issues, and I hope the Minister will be able to explain, perhaps in writing, where we are on some of these points.

The indefinite ban on puberty blockers for young trans people has been mentioned. The Women and Equalities Committee held an inquiry, and I am proud to say that although there were diverse opinions among Committee members—I am pleased to see some of them here—and the witnesses themselves, the debate was conducted with dignity and respect, with evidence and with a willingness to try to understand, which has all too long been missing. I cannot yet say what recommendations will come out, because I will get into trouble, but we need to be part of a solution. It is not just about pointing out what the problems are.

Although the Minister said that the use of puberty blockers poses unclear risks of harm, we need to look at the unclear risks of harm from not being able to provide healthcare for trans people when they need it. What can be done to mitigate some of those harms? We have talked about vitamin D, calcium, healthy diets and all the things that would address some of the concerns about puberty blockers. Why is it that the ban is explicitly only for their use in treating people with gender dysphoria? Why is it safe for people with endometriosis, prostate cancer or precocious prepubescence to take puberty blockers, but not for those experiencing gender dysphoria? The Women and Equalities Committee heard evidence from endocrinologists with brains the size of small planets, which was incredibly informative. There is much work to be done, but we need to ensure that it is done fairly, inclusively and with the community, not against it.

There is also a plan to reform the Gender Recognition Act, to make it easier for trans people to change their legal gender. I know that the Minister for Women and Equalities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) called the process “intrusive, outdated and humiliating” in 2022. That is just as true today as it was then, and I would welcome an update from the Minister on when the GRA will be reviewed.

While we all debate this issue, LGBTQ+ people are being isolated further. They are being targeted and talked about, which is coming through clear in the statistics. The number of hate crimes against LGBT+ people increased from 4,345 in 2011-12 to 22,339 in 2023-24. That increase is huge, and it affects real people's lives. There is also a huge amount of under-reporting, because we know that only one in eight victims report homophobic or transphobic hate crimes to the police. We need to build up society's trust in the Government to protect the most vulnerable from such crimes. We have a lot of work to do.

Banning conversion therapy has received cross-party support, and I look forward to finding out when we will see a timeline for the ban to come into force. As we heard in the Women and Equalities Committee yesterday, we need to commit to making it trans inclusive, and I would be grateful if that commitment could be reiterated from the Dispatch Box today. When will Ministers commit to a timeline for bringing forward the plan to make anti-LGBT hate crime an aggravated offence?

We have spoken about the new HIV action plan and building on the work of the previous Government, and I am really pleased that we have that. It was wonderful to see the Prime Minister casually taking an HIV test, which is not something that we would have seen in the past. The Minister and the shadow Minister spoke eloquently about the stigma around HIV, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince). Tackling that stigma is so important, but it is really difficult to break it down when those in power continue to punch down. We have seen that with President Trump's devastating cuts to USAID, which have left millions across the world without access to lifesaving antiretrovirals. What will the UK do to fill the gap? As we have seen in the US, progress is never inevitable.

I hope this Government can address the concerns of the LGBTQI community, and of those who want to live in a society free from persecution and barriers to healthcare services and safety. We must stay united in the fight, because an attack on one of us is an attack on all, and hatred never stays in one lane for long.

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

2.8 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a pleasure and an honour to follow the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen). I concur with everything she said about the work being done by the Women and Equalities Committee.

It is important to recognise where we stand in history, because when we talk about LGBTQ rights, women's rights or racial equality in this place, we often talk about the journey that we have been on and what we have achieved. Yes, we have achieved a lot, but we face enormous challenges at this moment in our history. Our country's LGBTQ community need to look at us today and know that we will stand up for them and that we will fight for their rights, including their right simply to be who they are.

But we have faced challenges before, and we have overcome them. I think of Scotland, particularly my home city of Glasgow, where I was brought up. In the 1970s, and when I was a student in the 1980s, it had unfortunately garnered for itself the unenviable reputation of being one of the worst places in Europe to grow up gay. Attitudes were somehow more polarised in Scotland than anywhere else in the UK. In 1957, a poll showed that more than 80% of Scots did not want homosexuality to be decriminalised; the figure was 51% in England.

In preparing for this debate, I found an article in a 1982 student newspaper from the University of Liverpool, whose student union disaffiliated with the University of Glasgow because it refused to allow a gay society to form. According to the union president, that refusal was on the ground that the age of consent for homosexual sex was 21 and, given that most students were younger than 21, the union did not want to

“give the impression that the Union in some way bestows an unofficial blessing on their activities... many members of the Gay Society are not interested in a constructive approach to changing the membership's attitude...but using this as a ploy to gain momentum to destroy the character of the Union as we know it.”

We hear an echo of that language today, but imagine how young LGBT people must have felt hearing and reading it. That was the kind of attitude they faced on a daily basis.

And imagine if we had been able to tell them that, 40 years later, Glasgow would be in the top five places in Europe for LGBT people to visit and enjoy and that, despite those attitudes, a long, rich history has developed of the community across Scotland coming together to support each other. We have improved so much, as those figures show.

Edinburgh Befrienders, later known as the Lothian Gay and Lesbian Switchboard, opened in 1974 and was the UK's first bespoke helpline for gay and lesbian people—beating Switchboard, which still exists, by just one day. Edinburgh was also home to Scotland's first LGBT bookshop, Lavender Menace, and in 1995 welcomed 3,000 people to Scotland's first Pride march. It is now huge, the event of the year, and I have been privileged to speak at it twice.

Of course, much of this change has been possible only because of public figures, including: former MPs such as Robin Cook, who equalised Scots law and English law on homosexuality; Val McDermid, whose

[Christine Jardine]

1987 novel “Report for Murder” featured Lindsay Gordon, Britain’s first fictional lesbian detective; and award-winning author Jackie Kay, the second woman and first lesbian to hold the post of Makar, Scotland’s national poet, and whose work has dealt with race, gender, transgender identities and her own sexuality. Thanks to such people and places, so many attitudes, laws and the understanding of LGBT+ people have changed for the better.

The age of consent was finally equalised for gay and straight people in England, Scotland and Wales in 2000. Same-sex couples were recognised for the first time in 2004 with civil partnerships. In the same year, trans people gained formal recognition in law for the first time with the Gender Recognition Act. And 20 years ago, same-sex couples gained the right to adopt. My party, its politicians and activists played a key role in that fight. As for me, the fight for LGBT+ rights is not just another political issue but, like the fight for all human rights, is part of who I am, what I believe and what my party stands for.

As has already been mentioned, it was thanks to the allyship and hard work of my noble Friend Baroness Featherstone that, in 2013, hundreds of thousands of campaigners and activists across the country finally had their voices heard with the achievement of marriage equality for same-sex couples. However, I sometimes think that focusing on the successes of the LGBT rights movement in the UK leads us to think that everything has been easy, that progress came without any great effort, and that it was quick and natural. We forget the negatives. We forget the fights we had to go through, and our country’s moments of shame. Shame is the only word for the treatment of gay men like Alan Turing, who was imprisoned, chemically castrated and shamed for his sexuality. Shame is the only word for the fact that, before 2000, anyone could be dismissed from the armed forces simply for being gay. Shame is the only word for the public distrust—indeed, hatred—that many gay men faced during the AIDS crisis. I grew up during that crisis, and the fear and stigma was sometimes palpable and, despite the public solidarity and support from many lesbian groups, it continued. And, of course, shame is the only word to describe the lasting impact of section 28 on a whole generation of young LGBT people who were not allowed to see themselves represented in schools or have appropriate protection from homophobic bullying.

We may think that these negatives are all in the past, but in recent years we have seen horrible debates on LGBT rights, particularly trans rights, and they have become increasingly toxic. Many trans people see their identities denigrated, their experiences ignored and their lives sidelined in debates about their own rights and their own lives. Too many people forget that at the centre of these culture wars are real people who simply want to live their life and be left alone to be who they are. It is time that we moved the debate forward. It is time that we thought about the people and not the politics, by focusing on the solutions to the issues that the LGBTQ community still faces. We must tackle the growth in hate crime, the misogyny and objectification faced by lesbians, and the intersectional issues faced by black and minority ethnic or disabled LGBTQ people. I am delighted that we will hear about the Government’s draft conversion practices ban Bill soon.

How can we support schools and businesses in eradicating homophobic and transphobic bullying and harassment? We have to think about how we can support trans people in accessing better support, and how we can help non-binary people to gain recognition in law. I hope that the Government will address all these points, and today I am more confident that they will.

The hon. Member for Luton North mentioned her daughter as hope for the future. My daughter is considerably older—in her 20s. A couple of years ago, we went to Edinburgh to see a play, “Everybody’s Talking About Jamie”, about a young cross-dressing guy who wants to wear a dress to the prom, which causes all sorts of hassle. We went because I had seen the film and loved it. About halfway through the play, I began to find the audience more interesting. I realised that everybody under the age of about 35 or 40 was totally engaged in what was happening, cheering for Jamie and booing his opponents. It was great. Everybody over the age of about 60 looked stunned. They were looking round, thinking, “What’s going on?”. My daughter Mhairi and I came out and, as we walked along the road, I said, “Your generation really don’t care, do they?”. She said, “No, we don’t get it. We don’t know why it’s a problem, and we don’t know why politicians don’t see that.” I thought to myself, “This toxic argument, which we all want to end, will end, because the younger generation will not allow their peers to be punished for being who they are in the way that mine were.”

I thank the Government for having this debate, and I thank everyone who is here. Please let us send the positive message that we will stand up and make sure that acceptance comes sooner.

2.19 pm

Kate Osborne (Jarrow and Gateshead East) (Lab): It is an honour to speak in the main Chamber in this Parliament, which, as Mr Speaker told us the other night at his reception, is the gayest Parliament in the world. LGBT History Month has never been more needed, as politicians of all political stripes, here in the UK, in Europe and, of course, in America, try to tear down the few protections that LGBTQ+ people have, attack our rights and rewrite history.

Our history and our activism need to be shouted about. We will not be silenced. We will not be erased. We will not be pushed back into the closet, and our history will be celebrated and remembered. We need people to continue to be brave enough to shout, “I am here.” I am a lesbian, and I am saying that in the mother of all Parliaments—and I will not stop shouting about it. Our diversity is what makes us wonderful; it gives us strength. “Dyke” is no longer an insult, but a badge that I wear with pride, just like my “she/her” pronoun badge.

It has been 40 years since I came out. At the time, I would never have imagined that I would be an out lesbian Member of Parliament 40 years on. In those years, we have seen huge improvements, but we also still have a really long way to go. I would not have imagined that I would still be having the same slurs chucked at me now as I did then, in arguments that try to make out that LGBTQ+ people are a threat to kids. That is why LGBT History Month is so important, why our activism is so important, and why I always say that I am an activist first and a politician second.

We must celebrate our history and remind people that we have always been here, and that trans people have always existed. We also have to remember the lessons of our activism. We have to remember and listen to those who lived those fights, and we have to learn from them in order to defend ourselves and our community from the latest wave of attacks. Over the last few years, I have repeatedly heard, “Why do we need LGBT History Month?”, “Surely Pride is not needed any more,” and “Hasn’t equality gone too far?”, but people are starting to understand why we still need those events. The fight to protect our rights never ends. Even this week, there are far too many people still making those types of comments, and too many people are woefully uneducated about LGBT history.

On 28 June 1970, on the one-year anniversary of the Stonewall uprising, the first Pride marches were held in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. Pride will always be a protest. Pride events are where our community, in all our diversity, make ourselves visible and stand up for our rights, our identities and our very existence. It is where we use our voices, and where allies show up in solidarity. Pride events are needed for LGBTQ+ visibility and solidarity, to celebrate the milestones achieved in the fight for equality and to remind us of the struggles that remain.

Last year, the town I live in, Hebburn, held its first ever local Pride, thanks to Peter Darrant from Out North East, who also runs the wonderful Pride Radio, which broadcasts nationally from my constituency of Jarrow and Gateshead East, and local business leaders such as Wendy Stead and many others. They faced a barrage of abuse. They had the flags ripped down, and the local paper removed the article about the event because of the thousands of abusive comments, and both Peter and I received horrific homophobic and lesbophobic abuse, online and in real life. I am proud to say that Peter, Wendy and the team are ensuring that the local Pride goes ahead again this year, and I will be there, but we need to see more solidarity from people in the face of such hatred, and we need to ensure that there are Pride events in every town and city.

We must tackle the rise in LGBTQ+ hate crime and, in particular, the huge explosion in transphobic hate crime over the last few years. Those attacks reflect an increasingly hostile environment, exacerbated by negative media and political rhetoric, not just in the US, but in Europe and here in the UK. Just last week, a GB News host linked LGBTQ+ people to paedophilia. The Leader of the Opposition has referred to trans people as an epidemic, and as I have reminded her, the definition of that is a

“widespread occurrence of an infectious disease”.

It is no wonder, with language like that, that under the last Conservative Government, the number of hate crimes committed on the basis of sexual orientation increased from around 4,000 in 2011-12 to nearly 23,000 in 2023-24. That is a disgrace, and I am pleased that our Government have promised to tackle LGBTQ+ hate crime by ensuring that it constitutes an aggravated offence.

I must echo the words of the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen): it is so disappointing to see not one Conservative MP on the Back Benches. Previous Labour Governments ensured that equality was at their heart, and I am so pleased that our first ever out lesbian Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for

Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), continues that work as a Minister in this Government. I also pay tribute to the Minister for Equalities, who is leading today’s debate, for making sure that we had this debate in Government time, and for everything that she is doing to deliver a fully inclusive ban on so-called conversion practices. I am proud that our Government have been clear that such conversion practices are abuse. They are acts that aim to change people’s—mostly LGBT+ people’s—sexual orientation or gender identity, and we will ban them.

I am proud that it was Labour that lifted the ban on lesbians, gay men and bi people serving in the armed forces, and introduced civil partnerships and laws to allow unmarried couples, including same-sex couples, to apply for joint adoption. I am proud that we are bringing forward a new HIV action plan. I was pleased to speak at an event jointly sponsored by the British Group Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Elton John AIDS Foundation in Parliament earlier this week. I am also proud that, despite media reports to the contrary, we will bring forward action on our manifesto commitment to modernise, simplify and reform the intrusive and outdated Gender Recognition Act 2004 and remove indignities for trans people, as well as ensuring that all discrimination and financial barriers are removed when it comes to same-sex in-vitro fertilisation.

However, I once again add a note of caution about our Government’s policy and rhetoric on puberty blockers. I believe that their decision is putting people’s health at risk. I am a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which has released a report that notes that the total withdrawal of access to puberty blockers outside a research trial in the UK may breach “the fundamental ethical principles governing research”.

I urge Ministers to consider the report in detail.

I thank Sue Sanders, the founder of LGBT History Month. We must remember our history, but also acknowledge those who continue to fight, such as Lord Cashman and Baroness Barker, Linda Riley from *DIVA*, Simon Blake from Stonewall, Shiv, who is organising the London Dyke March, Marty Davies, who does so much to ensure that trans history is recognised, and those who make things happen behind the scenes, such as Marshajane Thompson, who has done so much work in this space for decades. You are pushing for our history to be remembered, and for our rights to be defended, and it is you who will be remembered in future history books.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to thank you for being such a great ally, for co-hosting the first all-trans panel with me in the previous Parliament, which gave trans people a voice, and for also co-hosting events with me during lesbian visibility week. Our collective efforts can, do, and will continue to make a difference. By standing together, advocating for change and supporting organisations that champion LGBTQ+ rights, we can create a more inclusive and just world for all.

2.30 pm

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak in this debate—although in writing my speech ahead of today, I could not help but feel old. We are here to debate LGBT+ History Month, and, as a woman of a certain age, I have had the stark and daunting realisation that I am so old that I am part of history.

[Tracy Gilbert]

We are all aware of the stories of now famous LGBT+ people who were remarkable in their own field, but who lived too early to enjoy the progress that we have now achieved. Alan Turing, who was mentioned earlier, springs to mind. In many senses his story is now legend. The understanding of the role that he played in protecting this country is universal. That he happened to be gay should not have mattered. Despite his service, he was chemically castrated and suffered for the rest of his life. It was absolutely correct that the last Labour Government apologised, and that Turing was pardoned in August 2014.

LGBT+ History Month is often marked and reflected through stories, and today I want to share just some of my story. I grew up in a mining town in the '80s. The difference in the rights that I have now compared with then is striking. As a lesbian woman, I have spent my adult life fighting for LGBT+ rights. It was when fighting for those rights that I first visited this place. After many years of debate and setbacks, in June 1998, this House voted to equalise the age of consent between heterosexual and gay men. As an active member of the Unison City of Edinburgh lesbian and gay self-organised group, we had been campaigning for many years to end this discrimination. The Unison archive reminded me that our branch wrote letters to all Scottish MPs and MPs who had a link with our union—it was 320 in total. On the day of the vote, two of us came to this place to lobby MPs in person to vote for this historic change.

The next big fight for our rights in which I was actively involved was the repeal of section 28, or section 2A in Scotland. As someone who worked in local government and who had a same sex partner with children, I saw the damage that section 2A did every single day. The Act meant that teachers and youth workers could not provide support to children of same sex partners, or LGBT+ young people. It resulted in many public sector workers, particularly those in educational settings, feeling that they could not come out in their own workplace. Essentially, the law said that households, such as the one in which I was living, were just wrong.

When the Scottish Executive announced that they would repeal section 2A, there was a considerable and, at times, vile campaign against its removal, much of it financed by Brian Souter. Souter wanted to bankroll a private referendum and campaign for people to vote no. There were billboards across Scotland opposing the repeal. One billboard was on Ferry Road, one of the main bus routes through my home in the Edinburgh North and Leith constituency. I will never forget having to take David and Zoe to school on a bus and passing a sign that said that our family was not a real family. I cannot put into words the anger that I felt because of the worry that it created for me, the kids and their mum. Thankfully the people of Scotland rejected the buying of democracy by Brian Souter and the referendum never happened.

A few years ago the Scottish Trades Union Congress commissioned a book celebrating 125 years of trade union successes in Scotland, and, as a contributor, I wrote about this struggle. In the book I said:

“An overarching worry for the general public was that Souter was trying to bankroll this referendum and campaign. People did not want private, rich people to be able to buy democracy.”

I know that my constituents still hold this view.

The following decade and a half brought significant improvements to the rights of LGBT+ people in Scotland and across the UK. I look forward to reflecting on one of those rights in a few weeks' time when I celebrate my first wedding anniversary with my wife.

In closing, the struggle for LGBT rights has been fought in workplaces, in our communities, in our families and across this House for decades. We have had many successes but, sadly, some people still live in fear of their lives because they love someone of the same sex.

In this place, we must continue to fight to ensure that everyone is able to love who they wish regardless of where they are born. My hope is that, very soon, people across the world will have the freedoms that I enjoy here in the UK today.

2.35 pm

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) must have been thinking the same way as me when she wrote her speech, because, for me, LGBT History Month is always a time to reflect on the past and, at 47, I have a fair bit of past on which I can reflect.

Growing up in the '80s and '90s, I was all too aware of the challenges of HIV and AIDS. Many will remember that terrifying TV advert, the public health campaign, that was regularly played out on television. The reality was that it was a terrifying time, as there was no cure and no real treatment. AIDS was a death sentence. This in itself led to a stigmatised perception of the gay community in particular, because, as we all know, they were disproportionately affected by the disease.

Dr Nick Phillips, my lecturer at performing arts school, was the first person I met who had AIDS, and this was in 1996. Nick had been well known in the '70s and '80s for his performances with the famous Blooplips cabaret troupe, and he had performed extensively both here in the UK and in the US. It was his stint in the US that tragically saw him become one of the first people to catch HIV, as, unfortunately, did many of his friends. About eight years ago, I saw Nick do a touching solo performance, in which he portrayed the heartbreak of this period for him, losing so many friends while dealing with his own potential mortality.

Despite there being no treatment, Nick miraculously survived when many did not, and he is still around today to tell the tale. When I first met Nick and became a close friend of his, I had to overcome my own prejudice—touching him, hugging him, or giving him a peck on the cheek. I was one of many in the 1990s who were still absolutely petrified of this incurable illness. But Nick helped me see that it did not have to be a death sentence. It also meant that I could not catch it by just giving him a hug.

I remember Nick getting really ill in 1997 and ending up in hospital. He was one of the first to receive the experimental treatment of combination therapy, and it worked. Nick went on to compose the touching “Red Ribbon Requiem”, which was performed by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. Today, he has demonstrated just how far treatment has come, living a normal, healthy life and having naturally fathered two lovely twin boys.

Fast forward to 2020 and a really close friend of mine sat me down to tell me that he had HIV. My immediate reaction was despair. I thought that I was going to lose him, that he had that death sentence. But he laughed at me and said, “Don’t worry, my levels are already now undetectable.” This was because of the wonderful medication that he was taking. As long as he keeps taking it, he will go on to live a normal life.

Today, more than 30 HIV medications are available. Many people are able to control their HIV with just a single pill a day. Early treatment can prevent HIV-positive people from getting AIDS, and the diseases that it causes, such as cancer. HIV drugs also stop people who have the virus passing it on during sex. We still do not have a cure for AIDS, but with the right treatment, people who are HIV-positive can have a normal lifespan, but we must remember that HIV and AIDS does not just affect the LGBTQ+ community. It does not discriminate, like those who have been victims of the virus have been discriminated against in the past.

While most people have caught the disease from unprotected sex, regardless of their sexuality, others have contracted it from infected blood, from their parents during pregnancy, from sharing needles or from being horribly raped. I fully support the Labour Government’s new HIV action plan to end all new HIV cases in England by 2030. I am pleased that there is a cross-party consensus on that. The powerful image just this week of the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom publicly taking an HIV test on camera was wonderful. I took my test too, and I encourage everybody to do the same.

As we look to the future, with this Labour Government introducing greater protections for the LGBTQ+ community, such as the trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices and righting the wrongs done to LGBT veterans, we would think that we would have reason to celebrate, but as others have said, we must be aware that, among some, the narrative is shifting. We have seen our trans community under attack, being made to feel non-existent. Around the world, we have seen those in power in countries that we normally consider progressive rowing back on LGBTQ+ rights.

We sadly even hear such rhetoric coming out of this place. This week, the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe)—I have given him notice—stated that he would sack every DEI officer in the NHS. Just this weekend, he told them on social media how much he detests their work. Let us look at this. D stands for diversity: diverse people, and people from a diverse background. E stands for equality: helping those diverse people to gain equality and feel equal. I stands for inclusion: making them feel they are included in society. How dare somebody say that they want to ban that.

We need to call these people out—those who are looking to push us back and take away our rights, making diversity irrelevant as opposed to embracing it. We are a diverse country and should embrace everybody, whoever they are. We have made huge strides forward, so please, let us not go back. I pay tribute to all the pride organisations across the country, many of which are run by volunteers, for their wonderful work in raising awareness, and creating visibility and safe spaces for the LGBTQ+ community. I particularly call attention to Basildon Pride, where I am still the chair of trustees, and the wonderful Southend Pride, which offers so much to the community. Long may it continue to do so.

2.44 pm

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): I pay tribute to the Minister, who bravely spoke about the realities of teaching under section 28 and how she did her best to protect LGBT children in her class. I am so glad that she is now able to do so in Government. I also pay tribute to the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), who has always been a staunch and fearless ally, and speaks about these issues with warmth, compassion, humanity and empathy.

Today, we have seen some of the best of all parties represented in the Chamber. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies), has always been a voice on these issues within the Conservative party. The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), has long been ahead of many in this House when it comes to equalities issues, including being outspoken in support of the rights of sex workers, who must never be excluded from conversations on feminism and LGBTQ equality.

I am thrilled that we have the opportunity to discuss LGBT History Month in the Chamber for many reasons, not least because it gives me the opportunity to put on record just how gay Nottingham is and has long been. I was overjoyed to learn that Mansfield Road, where my constituency office is based, was home to queer-friendly cafés in the 1960s, and that just down the road in St Ann’s there was a flourishing lesbian pub scene. Nottingham also had a trans meet-up group all the way back in the 1970s—again, disproving the lie that trans people have only existed more recently—and people in our city were active in the section 28 protests, in fighting the AIDS crisis, and in running life-saving phone support lines. I was privileged to meet some of them at Silver Pride, a social group for older gay and bi men in Nottingham.

It is thanks to CJ DeBarra that much of that history and more is being uncovered. They have interviewed more than 150 members of our community, and delved deep into archives around the country to ensure that the history of Nottingham’s LGBTQ+ community is preserved, highlighted and celebrated. I also pay tribute to many of the groups that support and advocate for LGBTQ+ people in Nottingham today: Notts LGBT+ network, Notts Pride, the Pastel Project, Nottingham Against Transphobia, Silver Pride, the Nottingham Centre for Transgender Health, Notts Trans Hub and more. Those involved are unsung heroes—often volunteers who work tirelessly to improve the lives of people in our community. They deserve huge thanks and recognition.

As well as marking LGBT History Month, this debate coincides with HIV Testing Week. I commend the Prime Minister for being the first to take a public HIV test. At the height of the AIDS crisis, that would have been unthinkable. It demonstrates just how far we have come in this regard. It is thanks to activists who have fought so hard for proper treatment and funding for research, and against ignorance and stigma, that we are where we are today. HIV is no longer a death sentence—far from it—and ending the epidemic is possible. UNAIDS has set a goal of 2030, and it is vital that our Government play their part in helping to achieve that. I welcome our commitments in this area.

[Nadia Whittome]

Although it is right that progress is celebrated, it cannot come at the expense of recognising where we are continuing to fall short and even going backwards in some areas. Many of the struggles of the past are also struggles of the present. The LGBTQ+ community continues to face huge inequality, with trans people at the sharpest end, including higher levels of homelessness, discrimination at work and school, an increased likelihood of experiencing verbal and physical abuse, and, yes, disproportionate rates of suicide. This is not hyperbole, and recognising that sad reality is not in some way irresponsible. Life for many LGBTQ+ people is still immensely difficult.

We are living in an era of rising hate, both here and around the world, which is putting more people at risk. The state of politics on LGBTQ+ issues is appalling. Trans people have been made a political football, with their suffering almost considered a price worth paying to score political points. That makes some people feel tempted, I think, just to ignore the reality that trans people face, or to try to find some kind of so-called middle ground, but when the conversation has been dragged so far to the extreme right by anti-trans activists, the middle ground is far from moderate. History shows us that the answer is not to cede ground to the right's framing; it is to fight back. Generations of queer activists held fast in demanding their rights, and they won them eventually.

I want to make clear, as a feminist and as a woman who is not trans, that I am proud to stand with my trans siblings. Those who claim that standing up for my rights as a woman requires rolling back the rights of trans people do not speak for me. When people with very loud voices and newspaper columns tell us that there is a conflict between trans rights and women's rights, and that they are standing up for women, they are just not being honest. From the abuse towards women of colour competing in sport to cisgender lesbians being harassed in bathrooms, attacks on trans people endanger all women who do not fit within anti-trans activists' ever-narrowing heteronormative and Eurocentric parameters of womanhood. Far from advocating for women's rights, they are putting them under threat. Whether or not they realise it, they are helping to usher in the far right, who want to restrict women's freedom and reinforce traditional gender roles.

We see time and again, for example, campaigns against trans rights and abortion rights working hand in hand, because they are part and parcel of a politics being dragged ever rightwards. Entire Conservative leadership contests have been fought on the basis of who can talk the toughest when it comes to an extremely marginalised group. The Conservative party has gone from supporting gender recognition reform under the May Government and promising to outlaw conversion therapy, to outright opposing the first and coming up with excuses to allow the second to continue.

I am extremely sad to say that my party, too, has been dragged in the wrong direction. Our policy on trans issues is worse now than it was in previous years. That is the wrong approach. Our party must completely reject the tired narrative that trans people are a threat, which underpins so much of this moral panic. It was not true about gay men in the '80s and it is not true about the trans community now. Our approach must centre on

trans people themselves and their humanity. We must stand against bigotry and for human rights, and deliver material change, such as a trans-inclusive conversion therapy ban; the reform that we have promised in the gender recognition process; proper access to gender-affirming healthcare to trans people of all ages, including by ensuring that everybody who needs puberty blockers has access to them; the creation of inclusive schools; and the expansion of affordable housing.

LGBT history is not just in the past; it is being made every day. Labour is now in government, and we must decide what role we want to play. Thanks to years of campaigning by LGBTQ+ people, previous Labour Governments took important strides in equalising the age of consent, repealing section 28, and legislating for civil partnerships, adoption rights and gender recognition. The future of the next generation of LGBTQ+ people will be shaped, in part at least, by our party. That generation will judge us on our record. We still have time to make it one to be proud of.

I want to speak directly to them—to LGBTQ+ youth. I know that for so many of you, life is really hard and your future feels uncertain. There is no doubt that this chapter of history, and the direction in which the world is moving, often feels dark, but you are not alone. There are so many people who love and not just accept you but celebrate you for who you are, both within our LGBTQ+ community and outside it. Our history is one of struggle, but not every chapter has been bleak. We have faced down bigotry and won rights. Throughout it all, queer joy has always co-existed. A better world is possible, and I hope that one day the need for struggle and the feelings of darkness will have gone and that our joy is all that remains. Until then, we will keep fighting.

2.55 pm

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this important debate marking LGBT+ History Month. It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome).

One of my predecessors as MP for Scarborough and Whitby, Paul Latham, who was the MP from 1931 to 1941, was imprisoned for two years after being arrested for "improper behaviour" while serving in the Royal Artillery during the second world war. His story is a case study of how so often LGBT+ people have been hidden from history as they faced prejudice, persecution and, in the case of men who were gay, prosecution. Paul Latham's arrest drove him to try to end his life, which resulted only in a charge of attempted suicide being added to that of indecent conduct—a very sad story, but hardly exceptional.

The post-war period saw a sharp rise in the number of prosecutions in Britain for homosexual acts, with the fine for a first offence being the equivalent of £700 today and second offences punishable by a sentence of one to five years on average. Thankfully, in 1967, the then Labour Home Secretary Roy Jenkins provided parliamentary time for Leo Abse's ten-minute rule Bill to decriminalise homosexuality through the Sexual Offences Act 1967. Of course, there was still a long way to go to full equality.

Even as fairly recently as 1980, Scarborough town council refused permission for the Campaign for Homosexual Equality to hold a conference in the town—something

that damaged not only Scarborough's reputation at the time, but its tourist trade. The success of today's Scarborough Pride is therefore all the more welcome and is cause for celebration. Of course, there are other Pride events in nearby York and Leeds, but it is important for the community in Scarborough to be visible, which it is at Pride, with over 3,000 people taking part since it restarted in 2023.

I have taken part in both joyous parades, joining the Scarborough and Whitby Labour party carrying its splendid LGBTQ+ banner, along with my dog Tarka, resplendent in her rainbow neckerchief. The parade winds its way cheerfully through the town centre and along Foreshore Road towards Scarborough Spa where the festivities continue with fabulous performances, stalls and delicious food—of course, Tarka particularly appreciates the latter. Local businesses along the route decorate their shops and windows, putting pride flags out to show their support, with the whole town getting into the spirit of the event. It is a fun day, but it also helps combat the feelings of isolation that LGBT+ residents feel, and it has an educational value, breaking down barriers through family-friendly entertainment, so that future generations of the community will not have to experience the prejudice that older members have. McCain Foods, a major local employer, has gone above and beyond to support the event, but—as is the case for so many other charities—funding has been a struggle for the organisers, who all give their time for free. I pay tribute to those wonderful volunteers. I know that Scarborough Pride would welcome offers of support for this year's Pride, which takes place on 13 September, celebrating inclusivity, diversity and love on the Yorkshire coast. Of course, further up the coast in Whitby, we enjoy a massive outpouring of love and acceptance twice a year as hordes of splendidly costumed goths visit the town in April and October.

However, as we have heard in the House today and as we know from our own experiences, the LGBT+ community continue to suffer from abuse and discrimination. A brilliant exhibition of photos from last year's Scarborough Pride is running at Scarborough Art Gallery as part of LGBT+ History Month, but sadly, the comments section of a *Yorkshire Post* article about that exhibition has had to be switched off because of the vile nature of many of the posts. We have seen so much progress, including legislation to introduce civil partnerships and allow same-sex couples to adopt children, the equalisation of the age of consent and the repeal of section 28, all under the last Labour Government. That was followed by the right of same-sex couples to marry under the coalition Government, and I am so pleased to see this Government taking action to right a historic wrong and compensate LGBT+ veterans who were dismissed from the armed services because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The Defence Secretary has called this

"a moral stain on our nation."—[*Official Report*, 12 December 2024; Vol. 758, c. 1103.]

An honest look at history means confronting the prejudice and often brutal treatment that LGBT+ people have suffered in the past and continue to experience. It means facing the fact that progress has not been smoothly linear, but a case of stops and starts, in which each step forward has had to be fought for bravely so that people can be who they really are without fear. As the Member of Parliament for Scarborough and Whitby and a proud

ally of the LGBT+ community, I am committed to playing my part in the push towards progress—towards a future in which our children can live their lives free from judgment and discrimination, and can be their best, brightest and authentic selves.

3.2 pm

Olivia Bailey (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): It is a huge privilege to speak in this afternoon's debate. There have been so many wonderful contributions, and I thank all colleagues for them.

The question that I think I have been asked the most since I became an MP is, "Why did you want to get into politics? Why did you decide to become an MP?" I am often asked that by groups of A-level students or by kids in schools, and the honest answer is, "Because I know that politics changes lives, because it has changed my life." I grew up under section 28, feeling like who I was, was something to be ashamed of. When I was 16, people in this place scrapped section 28 so that my school could no longer deny my existence. When I was 17, they passed a law to allow civil partnerships and give me belief that I could have a relationship that was viewed as equal. When I was at university, they passed the Equality Act 2010, which outlawed discrimination against me, and then when I was 26, I embraced my now wife in Parliament Square as equal marriage became law. It is because of all those things that today, my wife and I have two wonderful children and the love and respect of our families, and I am able to stand here today as a proud lesbian MP.

It is a pleasure to speak in this debate for LGBT+ History Month. The debate is an important chance for us to reflect on our history and the brave pioneers who have come before us, and it has been wonderful to hear many of their stories today. However, I want to use my speech to celebrate not those who have achieved prominence, but everyday people who have persisted—who, in living their lives and having the courage to be themselves, are the reason we have made the progress we have. The real challenge for every LGBT+ person is not a battle with their career or their personal ambitions; the real battle each and every one of us faces is a battle with shame. When you are told that you are disgusting or when you are told that there is something wrong with you, it eats at you—it eats at your very sense of self.

Every time in our history that an LGBT person has steeled their nerves and held hands in the street, every time they chose to tell a colleague or friend the pronoun of their partner or chose to express their gender, and every time they chose love over fear, they showed an almighty act of strength. It is the most powerful political act there can be—an individual act of defiance, of courage—and today we stand here because of each and every one of them.

We have achieved so much as a community, but I want to conclude by reflecting on the work still to do, and the importance that this Government place on advancing LGBT+ rights, because our journey is not complete when there is still so much hate towards gay and trans people, while conversion practices still take place and while our gender recognition laws remain out of date. That is why I am so proud that this Government will deliver a trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices, make LGBT+ hate crime an aggravated offence and modernise the law on gender recognition.

[Olivia Bailey]

The best way to honour the LGBT+ people who have, throughout history, fought for our rights, often at great personal cost, is to never be complacent, to link arms as a community and to make it our solemn mission to ensure that Pride is not just our protest against the pernicious effects of shame, but something felt freely by every LGBT person finally allowed to just be who they are.

3.6 pm

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak, as a lesbian MP and as co-chair of the now very large parliamentary Labour party LGBT+ group, on what is the 20th anniversary of LGBT+ History Month.

LGBT+ History Month was first celebrated in 2005, but I first came to this country well before that—in the early 1990s—and for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, it was a very different place from what it is now. We were a community ravaged by the HIV epidemic that killed so many people and so many young people, but in a cruel twist, LGBT+ people were blamed for the very epidemic that was killing us. This led to section 28—that pernicious Conservative law that put teachers in fear of being sacked if they even acknowledged our existence, and left many LGBT+ kids alone and often bullied mercilessly at school.

On the streets, LGBT+ people were in fear of their lives. In 1990, in my own constituency of Ealing Southall, Michael Boothe was kicked to death by six men in Elthorne park in Hanwell simply because he was gay. Both the stigma of HIV and the chilling effect of section 28 kept so many people in the closet, living lives they could not be honest about for fear of the consequences. They were unable to be open to their own families, and always fearful of being outed, of being beaten up and of losing their ability to earn a living. In the 1990s, people could be sacked from their job just because of who they loved. As unreal as it now seems, you could even be refused service by a shop, a hotel or a restaurant because you were gay. There was no law against it.

How life has changed since then! The last Labour Government transformed LGBT+ people's lives. We repealed section 28, we lifted the ban on LGB people in the military and we equalised the age of consent. We outlawed discrimination against LGBT+ people in society and in the workplace. We gave LGBT+ people the right to adopt and to access NHS fertility treatment. We brought in tougher sentences for anti-LGBT+ hate crimes, with the first ever conviction for homophobic murder in the case of Jody Dobrowski on Clapham common. We introduced civil partnerships, giving same-sex partners the same rights as married couples. We changed the law to finally acknowledge trans people's rights to live their lives, and one of Labour's final acts in government was the groundbreaking Equality Act 2010.

Labour built a more equal society but since then progress on LGBT+ equality has been painfully slow or has gone backwards in many respects. Anti-LGBT+ hate crime soared to record levels under the last Conservative Government, which comes as no surprise given that they demolished neighbourhood policing in this country. They slashed funding to local councils so that life-saving services for young LGBT+ people—like

youth clubs and libraries, and specialist housing and sexual health workers—were cut, and they fanned the flames of a toxic debate about trans people's right to exist.

It has taken a new Labour Government to pick up where we left off and restart the work that is still needed to ensure equality for LGBT+ people. We are righting the wrongs of the past by paying compensation to those sacked from the armed forces for being LGBT+. We are rolling out opt-out HIV testing, with the Prime Minister himself taking a test on camera this week. And we have opened the first of six new trans healthcare hubs.

It is still too easy for employers to sack an LGBT+ worker but pretend it was nothing to do with discrimination. So Labour's Employment Rights Bill introduces a new day one protection against any unfair dismissal, which should make it harder for employers to get away with discriminating. Our plan to end zero-hours contracts will help stop young and low paid LGBT+ workers being denied work because of who they are. LGBT+ workers often have to come out to their employer when asking for time off, but the Employment Rights Bill introduces a new day one right to bereavement leave and a default right to flexible working, both of which will make it easier for LGBT+ workers to get what they are entitled to without having to tell their life story to their employer.

The Minister has confirmed she will reform outdated gender recognition laws and will soon be coming forward with inclusive plans to outlaw conversion practices, a promise repeatedly made by the last Conservative Government but which they again and again failed to deliver. Labour will finally stop this licensed abuse of LGBT+ people.

As part of our plan for change we will be modernising healthcare for trans people and we will be putting a specialist mental health professional in every school. We are also rolling out Young Futures hubs in every community, bringing back those youth services. This Labour Government will also put neighbourhood police back on our streets and make LGBT+ hate crime an aggravated offence.

LGBT+ History Month is a time to celebrate everything that has been achieved but also to acknowledge the work still to do to win true equality. This new Labour Government will transform LGBT+ people's lives again, just as we did before, and our plan for change will rebuild the NHS, the police and the education system that we all need, whether we are LGBT+ or not.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Mims Davies.

3.13 pm

Mims Davies: It is a privilege to close the debate for His Majesty's loyal Opposition. I thank the many Members who have contributed this afternoon, I thank Mr Speaker for his recent reception celebrating LGBT+ History Month, and I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for all you do in this space.

We have had an important and wide-ranging debate, and I apologise because many of my colleagues have been attending the debate in Westminster Hall so there are not as many of us here as before. That is slightly troubling, but I am sure some people are pleased about it.

In last year's debate I was particularly struck by the words of my former colleague and dear friend, the former Member for Carshalton and Wallington, Elliot Colburn.

He said:

“LGBT+ people have always existed; we did not just pop out of the ground in the 1960s and 1970s and start marching through the streets of London and other cities.”—[*Official Report*, 7 March 2024; Vol. 746, c. 393WH.]

That has struck me strongly this year. I say to him and Jed that their engagement was the best night ever. The former Member for Sutton and Cheam, Paul Scully and I had a brilliant evening, and we are still waiting for that wedding.

I agree with the Minister that under-40s do not see or feel any difference. That has been roundly celebrated in the Chamber this afternoon. In rejecting and, frankly, moving on from the culture wars, we must all keep compassion, safety, fairness and equality for all at the heart of this debate. If we do that this LGBT+ History Month, we will do the debate justice. It is a pleasure, as I have said, to speak on my party's behalf.

The hon. Member for Jarrow and Gateshead East (Kate Osborne) spoke about the importance of allies, and that is extremely important. The Minister talked about Fast Track Cymru and welcomed that work. There has been lots of huge and ongoing work that, if we all put every sinew to it, makes such a big difference. The Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) highlighted that it is far from weak for someone to show who they really are and to be visible, and that the friendship that our LGBT+ trans community friends give us is wonderful. They are heroes to us, and the best nights out are with our LGBT+ friends. As a heterosexual woman of a certain age in the gayest Parliament in the world, I think it probably explains my ongoing single status and why I have such a good time.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) spoke about the work of the many individuals who continue to stand up and help those friends, constituents and colleagues to come forward. The difference that allies make will never change. I absolutely agree with the point she made that furthering causes by putting individual safety at risk is extremely unhelpful, and rights are not a zero-sum game. The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) spoke about the work that she has long done in this area and the importance of recognising that families come in all shapes, sizes and forms. As a single parent for not far off the last decade, I think there is still much stigma around what a family looks and feels like. We all need to keep working to tackle that.

The hon. Member for Southend West and Leigh (David Burton-Sampson) spoke about the incredible Nick, and I think we would all love to meet him. The hon. Member reflected on those living with HIV and AIDS losing friends and facing their own mortality, which was extremely powerful, but he also mentioned the power of hugs, and hugs for all do make everybody feel better. The hon. Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome) spoke about bravery, and she absolutely is a brave Member. She is always happy to speak on what she truly believes in, and that is all we can ask for in this House. All power to her.

The hon. Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire (Olivia Bailey) talked about linking arms, and I love that. That is such a powerful image for us. The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) spoke about Pride events and the opportunity to feel

part of something bigger and to tackle isolation and loneliness. I am proud that our party brought forward the first Minister for loneliness. I, alongside the wonderful former Member of this House, Tracey Crouch, had that role. What a brilliant, amazing, globally recognised role it was. Those Pride marches are a great opportunity to break down isolation and loneliness.

I have a couple of points for the Minister. On the Conservatives' amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, we think it is important, as I highlighted earlier, that parents, loved ones and carers can view what is going on in the classroom in RSHE. The Minister shared her challenges in the classroom. I wonder whether, had she had parental support back then and been able to share those materials, life would have been easier. I reiterate to parents, carers and loved ones that if we want to have true understanding, true discussions and conversations at home matter equally.

I urge the Minister to work with me to help stand up for women on the women's health strategy. It is right that we are focused on equality and fairness for all. I hope that she, in her position on behalf of all women—whatever their sexual orientation—can be clear that we should have that focus, because women's health needs are different. We can be fair, promote equality for all, protect our children and focus on liberty, but we must ensure that women's health is at the heart of that. As I said earlier, some of the strongest and truest Conservative beliefs are freedom and opportunities for liberty and equality. They should always be at the heart of the discussion.

I mentioned some of my party's milestones. Back in 2013, the Conservatives funded the first ever HIV testing campaign for black, Asian and minority ethnic people, which was extremely important. In 2019, our party elected the most openly LGBT+ MPs of any party—that might have been superseded in these last few months—and this legislature was recognised as having the most LGBT+ Members in the world, which is quite amazing, really.

Under the Conservatives we saw a reduction in HIV diagnoses of 73% by 2021. In the same year, the number of people with HIV living beyond the age of 50 hit an all-time high, and one of the highest figures in the world. In 2021, we introduced the HIV action plan, which needs to be updated by 2030, to end new HIV infections. In 2022, people with HIV but no detectable virus were rightly able to join the military and fully deploy on operations. In 2023, barriers to accessing IVF were removed for lesbian couples, as they were in 2024 for those living with HIV.

I say to young people listening and watching that this debate is an important reminder of why months of celebration like LGBT+ History Month are really important. An awareness of history assists us all in our understanding while all communities in this country and those around the world look to us. I tell young people not to be afraid to be themselves. They should know that they will thrive when they are themselves. I say as their Member of Parliament, or as an ally to them: we are here for you to reach out to and to listen to you.

As we Conservatives believe that love is love, I am proud to stand up for women's rights and for all equal rights. We can all continue to do that positively in this place and elsewhere in the spirit in which the debate has rightly been held. All our constituents need that.

3.23 pm

Dame Nia Griffith: I thank all hon. Members for the constructive debate that we have had. I thank in particular the spokesperson for the Opposition, the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies), for her excellent contributions. She reminded us that the theme for this LGBT+ History Month is activism and social change. She paid tribute to Alan Turing, as other hon. Members did, and reminded us of her party's achievements in government and the progress made there. She—very helpfully—gave her full commitment to ending the transmission of HIV infections by 2030. We welcome that cross-party support.

The hon. Lady asked about the relationships, sex and health education guidance. The Government are engaging with stakeholders including parents, teachers and pupils to discuss the draft guidance on RSHE and gender questioning in schools and colleges, and drawing from available evidence, including the Cass review, to finalise the guidance. We are taking the time to get this right and considering all available evidence alongside the consultation responses before setting out the next steps. It is absolutely good practice for schools and governing bodies to share their RSHE policies with parents.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): I thank the Minister for chairing an excellent roundtable yesterday through the all-party parliamentary human rights group. The key message we heard from human rights campaigners from east Africa and global organisations was that we are experiencing LGBT history right now in the cuts to US Government funding being forced out by insidious transnational anti-rights campaigns. The call for the UK to step in and fill the gap left by the US Government was very clear, and I hope the Minister will be taking that forward.

Dame Nia Griffith: Absolutely. We have committed £40 million to those very aims. We will be stepping up to the mark with both our financial commitment and our leadership on the international stage.

We also heard from the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen). I thank her for her excellent work, and particularly for undertaking some very difficult discussions. I will certainly refer the discussions and evidence sessions on puberty blockers that she has enabled to my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary.

Like many other Members, my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North also mentioned Labour's proud achievements. However, I know she also wants to ensure that we keep to our manifesto commitments, and I know she will not allow any backsliding on this. I can give her that assurance—in the same way that my colleague, the Minister for Women and Equalities, did yesterday—that we are absolutely on track to bring forward a draft Bill on conversion practices, delivering a fully trans-inclusive ban that will provide safety for LGBT+ people subject to those practices. That draft Bill will then have the opportunity to go through pre-legislative scrutiny.

The spokesperson for the Lib Dems, the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), told us about LGBT history in Scotland and the progress from a very hostile environment to a much more accepting environment now. She also reminded us that in this recent toxic

debate, especially in respect of trans people, it is very important that we stick together. This is an important fight for us all, and we must take it very seriously. She particularly mentioned helping schools and businesses to tackle bullying, which is a fight we can never, ever stop fighting—no matter how much we do, there is always a danger of backsliding on such things, and we all need to be aware of that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow and Gateshead East (Kate Osborne) was quick to remind us how proud she is of her diversity and of the importance of activism in stopping attitudes backsliding. I was sorry to hear of the unfortunate happenings after the Pride march in her home town last year, and I very much hope that this year things will be better. I am glad to hear that people are fighting back and facing down that hostility. She also mentioned tackling the increase in hate crime, especially transphobic hate, and the pride she has in the fact that we are introducing the conversion practices ban and our HIV action plan. She mentioned her work at the Council of Europe. I pay tribute to her huge efforts there and to the work she is now doing on puberty blockers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) told us of her activism, particularly in Unison, in respect of equalising the age of consent and the impact of section 2A in Scotland, the section 28 equivalent in England and Wales. She mentioned the many successes of her campaigns, but said that people are still living in fear and that there is still much to do, particularly internationally.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West and Leigh (David Burton-Sampson) gave some very difficult reflections on the early '80s and the fear and stigma of HIV. He talked about the progress made on a range of treatments, reminded us that HIV is much wider than just the LGBT+ community, and said how much he supports our HIV action plan. Again, he was worried about rowing back on LGBT rights and the attacks on diversity, equality and inclusion. As he says, we should all embrace diversity—he is so right—to make the most of our talents, and to do the most good socially and economically. Of course, we have now named the office in government taking care of these responsibilities as the Office for Equality and Opportunity.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome) talked about how far we have come, but that there are still huge difficulties, especially for trans people. She talked about homelessness, suicide rates and how trans people have been used as a political football. She very clearly stated that as a woman she sees no conflict between standing up for women's rights and standing up for trans people. She rightly pointed out that attacks on trans people are from some of the very same sources that very happily attack women's rights, so we should not think that there is a conflict between standing up for women and standing up for trans people. Again, she made a very strong call for action and said a better world is possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) made reference to the very sad story of her predecessor Paul Latham. She mentioned the historic achievements we have made since then, and I also loved her description of her dog in its rainbow outfit.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire (Olivia Bailey) told us about the power of Parliament in increasing LGBT+ rights, but also about the power of ordinary LGBT+ people living out their lives, confronting the shame that very often they had to face down, and standing up and being visible. Again, she said that we should never, ever be complacent.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) contrasted the London she came to many years ago—I will not say how many—with the Labour achievements since, but mentioned the slowdown in progress, and the worry about progress going forward and the need to stand up for LGBT+ people. She mentioned the Employment Rights Bill, which does so much for the rights of all our workers.

I draw the attention of the House not just to the achievements of the past, but to the opportunities of the future. As I said very clearly, we will publish draft legislation outlining a fully trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices. We are committed to changing hate crime legislation to bring parity of protection for LGBT+ people and we are determined to regain our place in the international arena as an example of progress, not decline. As history shows us, progress is not static. New challenges will always emerge and hard-won rights must not only be cherished but guarded. That is why the Government are committed to upholding Britain's long-standing record of protecting the rights of individuals and ensuring that the Equality Act protects everyone. But there are others who would gladly reverse that, returning us to a time when discrimination was permissible, even empowered, under the law. We must be ever mindful of such intentions and remember from our history why we do not wish to revisit such times. Lawful discrimination, section 28, vilification and rejection by wider society are history, and they must remain such.

Whenever LGBT+ people have faced ingrained hostility or a rising tide of persecution and vilification, we have met it with bravery and resolve. We must remember these lessons, and apply them to the times. Progress is not inevitable—it must be fought for—and that struggle continues, one in which we must all play our part to ensure that we move forward and never back.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered LGBT+ History Month.

PETITION

Respiratory Syncytial Virus Vaccine Eligibility Criteria

3.35 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): People with respiratory illnesses, such as my constituent Jane Wessman, benefit greatly from receiving the free respiratory syncytial virus vaccine and also the shingles vaccine. The arbitrary decision to end eligibility for these vaccines at the age of 80 has a profound effect on those who need it the most. Accordingly, my constituent and others would like to see the age barrier lifted and the vaccines continuing to be available after the age of 80.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the Government take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to seek a reallocation of funds to ensure that the provision of the free Respiratory Syncytial Virus vaccine dose and Shingles vaccine dose is extended to those individuals who are 80 years of age or older.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that extending the eligibility criteria for the free Respiratory Syncytial Virus vaccine and the Shingles vaccine dose to individuals who are 80 years of age or older would bring considerable health benefits; notes that the former illness can cause acute respiratory infection, influenza-like illness, community-acquired pneumonia and lead to death and the latter illness can caused decreased vision or permanent blindness; and notes that vaccine doses for the Respiratory Syncytial Virus and Shingles virus are recommended to all individuals 80 years of age and over in the United States of America and in the European Union.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to seek a reallocation of funds to ensure that the provision of the free Respiratory Syncytial Virus vaccine dose and Shingles vaccine dose is extended to those individuals who are 80 years of age or older.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003045]

Reform of Private Family Law Hearings

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

3.36 pm

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): It is a sad reality of life that marriages fail. It can happen for a variety of reasons, and I do not seek to provide a critique on the underlying causes in today's debate. However, one of the tragic consequences of divorce is the disruption and pain that it causes to children.

It is evident that an amicable relationship between parents would enable arrangements in respect of where a child resides following a divorce to be made without the intervention of the courts, avoiding much additional heartache and the adversarial nature of contested hearings; but such contested hearings cannot be avoided in each and every case. While it may be the intention of the system to protect the privacy of individuals and families during these hearings, the reality is an increasingly inefficient and, at times, unresponsive system that fails to place the emotional and psychological needs of the parties at its centre. The flaws in the present system are regrettably clear for all to see, and in failing to address them, parties are left with a system that undermines the very values that it seeks to uphold—values such as fairness and natural justice, with the wellbeing of children at their core.

This is such a vast topic that it would be inconceivable to address all the issues in the course of an Adjournment debate, and I will therefore focus on the constitution of those on the bench who hear child arrangement order cases. The reason is simple: the anchor point in all family law cases involving a child should always be that child's best interests, and the creation of an outcome that supports and promotes the child's safety and emotional and psychological wellbeing and protects his or her future prospects.

It is almost inevitable that each and every Member of this House will have had experience of child arrangement orders in some way, shape or form, whether through constituency casework, personal experience or family and friends, because such cases are sadly far from rare.

If you will indulge me, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will tell the story of one such case, which I suspect will resonate with many up and down the country, because it is sadly an all-too-familiar experience. This is the story of a young child who, by virtue of their age, cannot fully articulate their wants or desires, whose loyalty is split in two, who does not want to be seen to betray either parent, who is already dealing with their world being turned upside down and whose future is decided in a sterile magistrates court, often as a mere timetabling exercise. That child now faces birthdays, Christmas and Easter all split in half, with weeks cut in two and weekends alternating between one household and another, leaving them with no sense of *oikophilia*—the love of home. This is a child who feels different from their classmates because they are forced to go to school with their overnight bag; a child who constantly lives with the anxiety of turning up to school without their sports kit because it is at the other parent's house; a child who feels nomadic, often confused and invariably distressed.

The scale of the problem can be seen starkly in the figures from the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service. As of 31 August last year, there

were 16,671 open private law children's cases involving 25,670 children. In the first quarter of 2024, the average time for such cases to reach a final order was some 44 weeks. During that period, children are left with uncertainty.

Magistrates have formed an integral element of the England and Wales legal system since the 12th century and the reign of Richard I, who appointed the first keepers of the peace. Almost 200 years later, pursuant to the Justices of the Peace Act 1361, the term "justice of the peace" was formally introduced. I do not propose reform of the role of magistrates lightly. However, I have reached the view that there is an overwhelming policy argument for doing so.

I am not for one moment suggesting that magistrates do not have an important role to play in the justice system; self-evidently, that would be a fallacy. However, I am increasingly convinced that the nature and focus of their work should be reconsidered, and in the case of child arrangement orders, it is my overwhelming view that the magistrates court should no longer play a role. The reason for mounting this argument is simple: there is an inequality in our legal system when it comes to private law family cases. These are cases that decide the nature and degree of contact a child has with each parent, determine the long-term future of a child and, by their very nature, have a significant, lasting impact upon any child.

Presently in this country, private law children's cases can be heard before a bench of three magistrates or a district judge with a family ticket. Magistrates are a lay bench who, well-meaning as they may be, are not required to hold any formal legal qualification. While magistrates undergo some specific training following their appointment, it is not more than a handful of days a year. In comparison, a district judge hearing such cases undergoes much more rigorous training and must have a law qualification as a prerequisite. The stakes in cases such as these could not be higher. This singular, most important decision, if misjudged, can set in motion a truly devastating series of events, thereby irreversibly damaging a child and their life chances.

Let us contrast that with the role of magistrates in the criminal courts. The maximum sentence that magistrates can hand down is 12 months. Sentences beyond that are remitted to the Crown court to be heard by a circuit judge. In comparison, a decision about a child's domestic arrangements until adulthood are frequently made by individuals with no specialist knowledge or training in family law. Furthermore, in the absence of formal legal training, subconscious bias is likely to run higher among magistrates than among members of the judiciary.

We can also take note of the approach taken by other courts in England and Wales. Specialist judges preside over employment, immigration, business and property, and social entitlement cases. Even in cases where a panel of three hears the case, it is a legally qualified, specialist judge who sits in the chair.

Given the importance of such decisions to a child's long-term prospects, the outdated practice of magistrates hearing private law children's cases should, in my humble opinion, be abolished. It is an inefficient and unreliable system of dispensing justice in the modern world, and it runs the risk of reaching inconsistent decisions of varying and questionable quality. Far too often, one hears of cases simply being decided as a timetabling exercise, and of a child's weekly diary being carved up without

proper thought or consideration of the impact on that child. Removing the role of magistrates in private law family cases, and ensuring that all such cases are heard by a specialist family judge, would ensure greater consistency of decision making, applying a more judicious and impartial approach.

On this most consequential of issues, we should ensure that those who preside over family cases are not only appropriately legally trained but well versed in the emotional, psychological and social factors at play. There should be much greater focus on ensuring that decision makers are trained in childhood development, domestic abuse dynamics and trauma-informed practices. The system in England and Wales is virtually unique in permitting lay magistrates to determine such matters, with most jurisdictions across the world entrusting the decision to a suitably qualified judge. In more complex cases, we should consider the use of specialised panels, as deployed in other tribunals. Such panels could have a judge as chair and suitably qualified wing members, who may include experts in child psychology. By adopting this model, the panel can take a more holistic approach to decision making.

My ask of the Minister is very simple. If we aim to create a better future for our children, if we truly believe in progress and not merely maintaining the status quo, and if we are to be believed when we talk of improving life chances for generations to come, the Minister should commit to reforming this outdated and harmful system, and ensure that all child arrangement cases are appropriately considered by a qualified judge.

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): I congratulate the hon. Member for Solihull West and Shirley (Dr Shastri-Hurst) on securing this important debate, and I applaud the thoughtful and considered way that he has approached a very challenging area. I think we all want to mitigate the disruption and pain that family law hearings cause to children, and he is correct to say that we all want to have children's best interests as the anchor point in everything we do. I applaud the way that he set out his concerns.

It is well known that family breakdowns are almost always challenging. At times, disputes are unavoidable and often intense, with children caught in the middle. The family court plays a crucial role in resolving such disputes. I want to clarify that magistrates who sit in the family court are formally referred to as "lay justices". However, for the purposes of today's debate, I will use the term "family magistrates", as it is more widely recognised.

The hon. Member is well aware that the family justice system in England and Wales relies on the work that family magistrates do to ensure that the most vulnerable members of society, particularly children, are protected and that their best interests are prioritised. I welcome his words about the importance of magistrates in our justice system, even though he has concerns about the role that they play in this particular area.

Although family magistrates do not have formal legal qualifications, they undergo a rigorous selection and a comprehensive training process that is provided by the Judicial College, and it is worth noting that family magistrates were involved in family proceedings long before the inception of the family court in 2014. Before that, family magistrates in the civil and county courts

would sit on family proceedings and make decisions about arrangements for children. There is a long history of that in our law.

Family magistrates are recruited from the community and bring a diverse range of impartial perspectives and experiences to the court. This diversity helps to ensure decisions are fair. It is crucial that we recognise and preserve their contribution to the family justice system for several compelling reasons, especially in the light of the arguments made by the hon. Gentleman in both his recent article and this debate, suggesting that family magistrates should no longer be able to make child arrangement orders. The House will know that these are family court orders that detail arrangements for a child, including where the child will live and how they will spend time with each parent. The hon. Gentleman has clearly spelled out some of the implications.

The Government appreciate the concerns raised by the hon. Gentleman regarding the training of magistrates. However, we believe the existing system has safeguards in place, which I will outline to offer reassurance not only to him but to everyone listening to this debate. I am talking about the training that magistrates receive, the role of the justices' legal adviser, and the robust protocols the family court has for allocating and reallocating cases.

I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the quality of training provided to magistrates is of a high standard. To safeguard their independence from Government, the statutory responsibility for training family magistrates rests with the Lady Chief Justice, as set out in the Constitutional Reform Act 2005. These responsibilities are exercised through the Judicial College, which offers a comprehensive training programme to equip family magistrates with the necessary skills and knowledge to handle the intricacies of private law children's cases effectively. This training ensures that family magistrates are prepared to make informed decisions that prioritise the welfare of the children involved. Further information on the college's training programme can be found on the judiciary's website.

When sitting in the family court, family magistrates are supported by the justices' legal advisers, who are qualified to provide advice on the law and procedures that family magistrates must follow, and who are also subject to an ongoing family training requirement. All judges, including family magistrates who hear applications for child arrangement orders, are obligated by the Children Act 1989 to have the child's welfare as their paramount consideration and must undergo extensive training. To be appointed as a family magistrate, each individual must undertake training on determining the best interests of the child, navigating the welfare checklists, and ways of communicating with people in court, particularly where there is high conflict.

Let me emphasise and underline the role of justices' legal advisers in assisting family magistrates in these cases. A panel of family magistrates decides cases with the presence and involvement of the justices' legal adviser. The recent case law, *Derbyshire County Council v. Marsden*, confirms that these advisers play

"an integral, and legally required, part of the decision making process."

Justices' legal advisers provide essential guidance and support to family magistrates, ensuring that decisions

[Sir Nicholas Dakin]

are made with a thorough understanding of the complexities of family law, and always prioritising the best interests of the children involved.

Nor are family magistrates operating in a vacuum. They rely on assessments carried out by trained professionals for arrangement orders, prohibited steps orders and other key rulings when making arrangements for children. This collaborative approach enhances the quality of the family court's decisions in these very sensitive cases.

Family magistrates do not deal with the most complex cases in the family court. Established rules and guidance determine the appropriate level of judiciary based on a number of factors, including the complexity of the case. Cases involving certain complexities will be immediately allocated to other tiers of the judiciary—district judges, circuit judges and, at the most serious level, High Court judges—in accordance with the issued guidance. It is like a lift that the judiciary enter at the appropriate level.

The judiciary, including family magistrates, have an ongoing duty to keep allocation decisions under review, particularly if further information is received from the parties and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service. The case can then be reallocated to a more appropriate level of judge depending on the complexity and the issues in the case, and that can happen in the course of proceedings. The system ensures that magistrates handle appropriate cases for which they are trained, while more complex cases are managed at a different level of the judiciary, depending on the issues in the case. The mechanism not only maintains the efficiency of the legal process, but ensures that justice is served appropriately.

Family magistrates also play an essential role in the effective functioning of our family justice system. The number of outstanding cases in the system has grown since 2018, and the average time taken for cases reached a high of 47 weeks in 2023 under the previous Government,

which is similar to the data the hon. Member shared earlier. While we have taken steps to address the underlying issues, which means we are on track to reduce the outstanding caseload by more than 10%, there are still significant challenges facing the system. Family magistrates routinely deal with a number of cases about children. Removing that capacity from the system would fundamentally undermine the effective administration of justice, but more than that, the resultant delays in resolving cases would have a profound impact on the wellbeing of the children involved and on parents seeking to resolve their issues.

Furthermore, the Government remain committed to reforming private family law processes where appropriate. Just last week, the Government announced that our new pathfinder model of private family law proceedings will be extended to mid and west Wales in March and to West Yorkshire in June. It is a significant reimagining of private law proceedings, with dedicated support for domestic abuse survivors, up-front multi-agency information sharing and a greater emphasis on the voice of the child through the production of a child impact report. Those proceedings allow our judges, including family magistrates, to have a much richer understanding of a family's circumstances from the outset and ensure that parties are fully supported by professionals.

It is clear that family magistrates are indispensable in hearing private law children's cases. Their collaboration with justices' legal advisers, the quality of their training, the mechanisms for allocating and reallocating difficult cases and their contribution in alleviating the burden on all our judges are all critical factors that contribute to a more efficient and effective legal system. By maintaining the involvement of family magistrates in those cases, we can ensure that the best interests of our children, which are what we are all focused on, are upheld and that justice is delivered in a timely and compassionate manner.

Question put and agreed to.

3.58 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 13 February 2025

[DR ROSENA ALLIN-KHAN *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

HIV Testing Week

1.30 pm

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered HIV Testing Week.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Allin-Khan. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate during National HIV Testing Week in England. Each year, the campaign funded by the Department of Health and Social Care, and delivered by the Terrence Higgins Trust as part of the national HIV prevention programme in England, brings us together to raise awareness of HIV and to promote regular HIV testing, in particular among the groups most affected by HIV. It is always the way that Parliament works that this debate coincides with a debate on LGBT+ History Month, although the two subjects are so linked.

Over the Christmas recess, I was reading Alan Hollinghurst's book "The Line of Beauty", which brings home the fact that, at that time in the 1980s, a test was potentially a death sentence. People dreaded going for one, because of the result it might bring and the impact on their life and the lives of their family and those close to them. We have moved on to be able to say with 100% certainty that, if someone gets a positive result from an HIV test—which people can do in their own home—treatment means they can have a normal life expectancy and cannot pass the virus on. That remarkable fact is what makes this a generation that can end new HIV cases across this country.

I encourage everyone in the Chamber, across Parliament or watching these proceedings to take part in the current campaign and to order a free HIV test. I was particularly pleased to see the Prime Minister take a test and demonstrate how straightforward and lacking in process it is. Many people still think a test might involve needles and health service professionals, but a test can be taken at home with an easy-to-access kit.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the right hon. Member for his excellent opening remarks. Does he agree that the Prime Minister taking that test in Downing Street highlights the issues around stigma and the fact that people can test safely within the confines of their own home, without anyone else or the glare of a clinic? It is that person and the test kit, with sample results.

David Mundell: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady, who is one of my co-chairs on the all-party group on HIV, AIDS and sexual health. She has done so much to promote this issue, particularly among difficult-to-reach groups in the black and minority ethnic community and among women, and I commend her for that. I agree

absolutely: taking a test, as I have done many times, is a routine matter that, in essence, involves merely pricking a finger and delivering a small amount of blood. That can be returned anonymously, and the result comes back without anyone else being involved. Were any issues to arise from the test, the person would know that proactive and supportive contact would generally be made with them.

Normalising HIV testing is crucial if we are to find the 5,000 people across the UK living with undiagnosed HIV. Central to that is opt-out testing in emergency departments. I am proud that with parliamentary colleagues on the all-party parliamentary group, and with the help of Sir Elton John and the amazing campaigning of HIV charities, we won the case for a £20 million investment in opt-out testing in England in 2021 and for a further £20 million for expansion to 47 more A&Es in 2023.

Since its routine introduction in 2022, opt-out testing has been an incredible success in normalising HIV testing in the health sector. Across 34 emergency departments over just two years, nearly 2 million HIV tests have taken place. In its first 18 months in London, Brighton, Blackpool and Manchester, more than 900 people were newly diagnosed with HIV or were found, where they had been lost to HIV care. A further 3,000 were found to have hepatitis B or hepatitis C.

This approach also relieves pressure on the health service. Data from Croydon university hospital found that when it first started opt-out testing, the average hospital stay for a newly diagnosed HIV patient was almost 35 days. Within two years, the average stay was just 2.4 days.

I am proud that the last Government were the first to fund opt-out testing. I am also pleased that in November the Prime Minister announced further funding to extend the testing intervention period. That will bring to 89 the number of hospitals funded to routinely test for HIV anyone who has their blood taken in the emergency department.

As a Scottish MP, I want to be able to tell hon. Members how we are leading the way in addressing the HIV epidemic in Scotland, but unfortunately that is not quite the case. There are good news stories. Early action to make pre-exposure prophylaxis—PrEP—freely available on the NHS has helped to drive down new transmission of HIV in Scotland. Year round, everyone in Scotland has access to free at-home HIV testing, which is made available through the Terrence Higgins Trust testing service and funded by the Scottish Government. In 2023, a landmark campaign delivered by the Terrence Higgins Trust addressed the stigma that we all know surrounds an HIV diagnosis. It is astonishing that that campaign was the first of its kind since the tombstone adverts four decades ago. I hope that that important work to combat HIV stigma continues in Scotland and across the rest of the UK; it cannot be a one-off.

However, for all this success, the reality is that progress towards achieving the historic feat of ending new HIV cases in Scotland by 2030 is now at risk. I have mentioned the resounding success of emergency department opt-out testing in England, and the role that that will play in helping to get the NHS in England back on track towards reaching zero new HIV cases by 2030. The clear evidence is that opt-out testing works, yet Scotland is still to adopt the same universal approach to HIV testing. As it stands, no area designated as high prevalence, such as

[David Mundell]

Glasgow and Edinburgh, is benefiting from the opt-out testing programme. I have again written to Scotland's Health Minister, Neil Gray, to ask that that be reconsidered.

An estimated 500 people are living with undiagnosed HIV in Scotland, and a growing population of people are living with diagnosed HIV but are no longer accessing vital treatment and care. If we are to succeed in getting to our 2030 goal across the UK, we must reach each and every one of those people. Every day that emergency department opt-out HIV testing is not on offer, opportunities to find and support people living with HIV are being missed.

Although Scotland is clearly not within the Minister's remit, I hope that she, the public health Minister and the Health Secretary will use opportunities to raise this issue with the Scottish Government and to highlight their own successes. As she may know, the Scottish Government are keen to highlight what they perceive to be health failures in England. This is a great opportunity to highlight a health success and to call the Scottish Government out on their own approach.

That also applies to HIV testing week. For this week to be most effective, it should apply across the United Kingdom, so that we can benefit from the positive publicity that came from the Prime Minister's test. That is not available to people in Scotland, because HIV testing week is not happening there this week, despite my calls last year for it to be extended to Scotland. There is a testing week in Wales, but it is not as co-ordinated on a UK basis as we would want to see. Such co-ordination would allow everyone to benefit from promotional campaigns such as the excellent one in Parliament this week, which the Terrence Higgins Trust facilitated for Members of the House.

I very much recognise the work of Terrence Higgins Trust Scotland and Waverley Care, which I had the great pleasure of visiting at its premises in Edinburgh recently. They are doing a great job, but when we have National HIV Testing Week, it needs to be across the whole United Kingdom. Testing is the only way we know to find a person's HIV status, and that is why the current campaign, testing week and interventions such as opt-out testing are so integral to our HIV response.

We are now five years away from 2030, and in no part of the UK are we on track to achieve our goal of ending new cases of HIV. Getting there will require cross-party working, and we have always worked cross party on the all-party parliamentary group, which has the highest number of members of any APPG in this Parliament and has been around for over 30 years. Many Members across Parliament work tirelessly in that group to ensure that we reach the 2030 goal, and I am sure the Minister will tell us more in her response about what is being done to achieve that.

I know that this is not directly within her remit, but it would be remiss of me not to mention testing in other countries. We have heard about HIV testing week here in the UK, but poorer countries rely on the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and particularly the United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, which it funds along with the US to deliver testing and treatments. We know that the future of US funding is, at best, uncertain. This country has always been at the forefront of the Global Fund,

and leadership on this year's replenishment is important. I was pleased to hear what the Prime Minister had to say yesterday about Gavi and vaccinations, and I hope he will be able at some point to give a similar commitment on the Global Fund. I hope all Members would agree that it would be quite wrong if we were to achieve the target in the UK, but just left poorer countries and the rest of the world to get on with it and, in fact, go backwards as a result. I make that call in relation to the wider issue.

I encourage anyone to take a test. It is very straightforward and easy, it will help to identify those we do not know about and it will help us to achieve that 2030 goal.

Several hon. Members rose—

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob—as they are doing—if they wish to be called in the debate. Given the number of Members who wish to speak, and to ensure that everybody gets to say what they wish to, I suggest an approximate time limit of five minutes. We will move to the Front-Bench spokespeople at about 2.28 pm. I call Jim Dickson.

1.45 pm

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Allin-Khan. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) for securing this important debate and for his excellent speech.

We are here because of the work done by the excellence Terrence Higgins Trust, which, with the Department of Health and Social Care, runs the vital National HIV Testing Week campaign. It provides a vital staging post towards the goal, which we all share, of ending new HIV infections by 2030. This week, as the right hon. Member said, anyone can order a free postal HIV test, and I encourage anyone listening to do so. I was pleased to be able to take a test myself just next door, on Tuesday, at the excellent event run by the Terrence Higgins Trust.

I welcome the goal set by the last Government to end new HIV cases by 2030, and I am pleased that the new Labour Government have commissioned a new HIV action plan for England, which is expected to be published in the summer, to make that a real prospect as we approach 2030. As I am sure other hon. Members will agree, if we are to meet this ambitious target, it is crucial that we find the estimated 4,700 living with undiagnosed HIV in England, as well as those across the UK, and ensure that they are getting the lifesaving treatment they need and cannot inadvertently pass on the infection. It is clear that that will happen only through testing.

In my previous life as cabinet member for health in Lambeth, we worked very closely with the Elton John AIDS Foundation to introduce the world's first social impact bond focused on bringing people living with HIV into care. We worked with a coalition of third-sector organisations across the three boroughs of Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham to ensure that health settings earned outcome-based payments each time they identified someone either newly diagnosed with HIV or someone who had stopped treatment, and linked them back into care. Our brilliant GPs across the three boroughs carried out opt-out testing to accompany this set of changes. The results were dramatic: over three years, more than

265,000 people received HIV testing, and more than 460 south Londoners living with HIV entered treatment. More than 200 people received a new HIV diagnosis and attended their first treatment, and 250 who had stopped treatment returned to care.

I am proud of the work done across local government in the fight against HIV/AIDS. In Lambeth, for instance, the council has led London boroughs on commissioning of the London HIV prevention programme. We were in the forefront of the successful campaign to get PrEP provided free on the NHS for all those who needed it, and the council continues to jointly commission, with our neighbouring boroughs, work with marginalised groups to reduce stigma and thereby increase awareness of HIV and the need to take tests.

I support the Government's aim of ending new HIV cases in England by 2030, supplemented, it needs to be said, by the Mayor of London's great work in ensuring that the capital is a fast-track city. However, that date is only five years away and, like the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale, I worry that without a dramatic increase in testing, we will not get there. I was pleased therefore that last month the Government announced an expansion of the number of hospitals carrying out HIV opt-out testing, including Darent Valley hospital in Dartford, in my constituency. I welcome the service that will be made available to my residents as a result.

I hope that the new HIV plan for England, expected this summer, will build on that expansion and bring the increase in opt-out testing we need to find all those unknowingly living with HIV. The incredibly welcome 5.4% increase in the public health grant for 2024-25—that is £200 million, which is the biggest increase for many years—will strengthen this work, alongside so many other areas in which we need to tackle health inequalities.

I would like to end by paying tribute to all the charities working so hard to tackle this issue, including but not limited to the Terrence Higgins Trust, the Elton John AIDS Foundation and the National AIDS Trust.

1.49 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Dr Allin-Khan. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) on bringing forward this important debate and on the work he continues to do with my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi) on the APPG.

While we will spend most of this afternoon's debate speaking about the goal to end new HIV transmissions by 2030, I feel it is important to recognise just how far we have come in our understanding of HIV and treatments for it, and in our education and awareness raising. We have seen so much progress in the fight against HIV since the 1980s crisis. Although there is still a way to go, it is through open discussions, such as the one we are having today, that we have been able to reduce the number of HIV cases in the UK down to an estimated 113,500. But it is thought that 4,700 people are unaware that they are living with HIV, and that is why it is vital that we continue to push to increase testing. We know that when caught early HIV is treatable and that the quality of life of those living with HIV is far better than it was back in the '80s. Unknowing carriers risk not

only not getting the treatment they need or getting it too late, but unknowingly infecting others. Testing is easy, quick and can save lives.

We know that testing among men who have sex with other men is high. This is incredibly encouraging, but we must do more to increase testing among heterosexual men, heterosexual and bisexual women, and the trans and non-binary community. The stereotype that HIV is only something that affects men who have sex with men is not true. In fact, the increase in infections in 2023 was attributed to sex between men and women, with a 35% increase among heterosexual men and a 30% increase among heterosexual women.

We should be doing more to encourage testing among all groups. That means greater investment in local and community-based public health initiatives, so I am pleased that the Government are investing in local government public health. I am particularly pleased to hear about the £38 million that is being awarded to my borough of Lambeth, which will go a long way towards supporting people with HIV, preventing HIV and funding other public health initiatives that the borough runs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson) spoke about the important role that councils play, and it is a crucial role indeed. They encourage testing and are well-poised to target the right communities and areas to increase awareness, and they can tailor messaging in the way that is needed. The work of local councils and community-based organisations has really helped to increase testing rates and reduce stigma. It has also helped to ensure that as many people as possible know their HIV status, and the recent round of Government funding will continue supporting that work.

I hope to see more from the Government on the international front. We must actively look to support international efforts to stop HIV transmissions, especially at a time when President Trump is running his reckless review of American aid and has put the future of the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief in the balance. Any credible attempt to end HIV transmission must include a global response. When it comes to ending HIV transmission, we are not an island. Ending new cases here will only last for so long if we are not contributing to efforts to end them abroad. Where the US is stepping down from efforts to tackle global HIV transmissions, we should be stepping up.

As it stands, we are already not on track to reach our target of ending new cases by 2030, but I hope that today we will hear insights from the Minister on the steps the Government are taking to increase testing and to end new cases in the UK and abroad. As I am sure other hon. Members do, I eagerly await the Government's new HIV action plan in the summer.

1.54 pm

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship for the second time this week, Dr Allin-Khan. I thank the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) and the co-chairs of the APPG for all the work that they do.

I also echo calls from hon. Members for the funding for global work that is being shamefully cut back by the new US Government to be found from within this country. I ask the Minister to look at the pressure that is also being put on, and the funding that is being withdrawn

[Siân Berry]

from, wider rights-based groups, which we spoke to yesterday in a fantastic and interesting roundtable. There are many groups working in the global south to support LGBT rights and reproductive rights, which include healthcare. The impact of the cutback more widely will be on health, and we owe it to those groups to ensure that we are doing what we can to make up for what the American Government are so awfully doing.

I am pleased to join this important debate and to support HIV testing week. I absolutely commend the efforts being made by so many MPs, including the Prime Minister, to promote HIV testing. That is great to see. As an MP for Brighton, I am proud of the work of the Terrence Higgins Trust—which is partly based in my constituency, not far from my office—for making this a bigger event every year, and more and more inclusive. I recently visited THT to see first-hand the incredible work it is doing to end new transmissions of HIV, supporting people to live well with HIV, and challenging the stigma and all the things that go around that. Its work with partners in my city, like the pioneering Lawson unit at the Royal Sussex County hospital and the local HIV charity, the Sussex Beacon, is all so exciting.

Opt-out testing was mentioned. The emergency department at the Royal Sussex has been doing that testing since March 2022. It has since been rolled out nationally in areas of very high HIV prevalence. In Brighton, the team at the Lawson clinic has identified 16 new HIV diagnoses in recent years. That sounds like a small number, but the impact for each individual is absolutely massive. They are all people whose HIV will almost certainly have gone undetected up until then. All the work that is being done to normalise testing as part of a trip to A&E, when blood is drawn, does so much to reduce HIV stigma, help people, and save and improve lives.

Brighton also has some groundbreaking digital pathway work happening. The locally co-designed HIV app EmERGE has been a big success. It is a European project centred in Brighton, and I am told that people absolutely love it. There are about 720 people using it for PrEP access, appointments and support. This innovative approach has helped ease the pressure on local services and freed up about 1,000 local appointments per year. That is fantastic work, making all our money go further and helping people to cut their transmission risk without fuss and bother. That is what we all need to be working towards.

Let us be clear: zero transmission of HIV is possible by the target date of 2030. The work in Brighton that I have just described proves that. I truly believe that Brighton could be the first place in the UK to achieve that target, given the comprehensive work going on. I know that hon. Members in the Chamber are aware of all of that, and I hope the Minister will set out how a roll-out of that model across the UK will be funded.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (in the Chair): In order to get all Members to speak in this important debate, I gently suggest a time limit of three and a half minutes.

1.58 pm

Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Allin-Khan. I will certainly try to keep to three and a half minutes.

As we mark National HIV Testing Week, we unite to promote regular HIV testing, particularly among those most affected. Despite significant progress, we are advised by the Terrence Higgins Trust, the National AIDS Trust and the Elton John AIDS Foundation that, as has already been said, we are not on track to meet the goal of ending new transmissions of HIV by 2030.

The latest data from the UK Health Security Agency shows a plateau in the decline of transmissions among gay and bisexual men, and a rise in new transmissions outside of London. To reverse the trend, we must scale up HIV testing and find the estimated 4,700 people living with undiagnosed HIV in England. The Brunswick Centre in my area plays a pivotal role in this effort. Its work in providing support, education and testing services is of huge value. It offers a safe space for individuals to get tested and receive the care they need. By partnering with local communities, the Brunswick Centre ensures that everyone has access to lifesaving information and services. I join the HIV community in calling on the Government to invest in year-round online HIV and STI postal testing services, and to continue opt-out HIV testing in emergency departments.

We must also address the stigma that prevents many from seeking care. Everyone living with HIV deserves to feel safe and supported in every healthcare setting. On the issue of stigma, I commend my senior parliamentary officer and the secretariat for the APPG on HIV, AIDS and sexual health for their outstanding work in combating stigma and educating us on the actions we must take to address this crucial issue. Together with the dedication of organisations like the Brunswick Centre, the Terrence Higgins Trust and others, we can achieve the goal of ending new HIV cases by 2030 and be the first in the world to do so. Let us make HIV testing a routine part of healthcare and ensure that no one is left behind.

2.1 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair and to serve under your chairship this afternoon, Dr Allin-Khan. I thank the Terrence Higgins Trust for partnering with the Labour African Network to host a fantastic event on Monday that highlighted why it is so important for us to continue testing, and especially to get the communities that do not often come forward to test. It was good to hear so many people at that event highlighting why that is so crucial. That was the first engagement of the new Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton); it was a really good event for her to attend.

I also want to highlight the visit to University Hospital Lewisham that I conducted in February 2022 to look at its opt-out testing with my hon. Friends the Members for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) and for Lewisham East (Janet Daby). I was struck by the age of someone that had been lost to HIV; she was an elderly woman in her 80s. That is why it is so important to test.

I thank all hon. Members for their comments and my wonderful APPG co-chair, the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), for his opening speech. I want to focus my remarks on a critical issue that affects our communities: HIV and its impact on the black communities in the UK. Despite significant advancement in HIV prevention and treatment,

black communities continue to face disproportionate rates of HIV diagnosis and late detection. That disparity is not just a statistic; it represents the lives affected by systematic inequalities, stigma and a lack of culturally appropriate services.

I want to highlight the work of the London HIV Prevention Programme, which is taking vital steps to address the disparities through new outreach work aimed at black Londoners. Under the banner of Do It London, that programme is designed to increase HIV awareness and encourage regular testing to provide robust support for those living with HIV. By partnering with trusted communities, it ensures that its efforts are culturally sensitive and effective.

I want to give a shout-out to Marc Thompson, the lead commissioner for LHPP. He brings his personal passion and lived experience to that initiative. As a black, queer Londoner and HIV activist, Marc understands the unique challenges that our communities face. His dedication is a testament to the importance of having voices from within the community leading the charge.

I also want to put on record my thanks to Fast-Track London, One Voice Network, NAZ, LGBT HERO, METRO, Positive East, Sophia Forum and the 4M network for the work they do to provide services not only in my constituency, but right across London. We need an approach that is informed by the communities affected. Do It London is leading the way by allowing black Londoners to shape the services designed for them.

We must also recognise that HIV is not just a health issue, but a social issue. Black communities have historically been under-represented in prevention and support. We must build trust and address black HIV services and outdated stigma. By prioritising those efforts, we can reduce HIV rates and improve health outcomes for black communities. Together we can create a service that works towards the goal of no more HIV by 2030.

2.4 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) on leading today's debate. I am my party's health spokesperson, so I make it my business to come to health debates. Indeed, I think I have missed only one debate on HIV in the 14 years that I have been here.

Health is a devolved issue, so there may be different guidelines surrounding access to testing and to testing itself, but we all have the same goal wherever we are in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. England could be the first country in the world to reach the goal, but we are currently not on track, so perhaps the Minister will tell us what action will be taken to ensure that happens.

In Northern Ireland, there has been a significant increase in testing in recent years. Efforts have been made to promote early intervention and treatment. The Public Health Agency in Northern Ireland revealed that in 2023, a record 92,635 tests were conducted. Given that the population is 1.9 million, I think that is very significant. That is a 5% rise on 2022, and it is the result of a massive commitment by us—health is devolved to us—to ensure early detection.

On the other hand, the number of new HIV cases has also risen. In 2023, there were 101 cases—67 men and 34 women—which was a 41% increase on 2021. I know

the numbers are small, but the percentage is quite worrying. It is alarming that some of those cases were linked to injecting drugs, so will the Minister give us some idea of how we will address that issue? It is not just about physical exchange; it is also about the use of drugs, so what can be done to stop that? Sharing a needle is a cause of HIV for some drug users, and that concerns me.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the '70s and '80s—I am of an age that I can remember them very well. Historically, HIV was a stigma, and it was Princess Diana who helped to take away some of that. I always remember that she met people with HIV, sat alongside them, shook hands with them and drank out of the same teacup, and that dispelled some of the concerns that people had, so we are thankful for that.

Testing for HIV of course must be discreet. There are numerous sexual health clinics across Northern Ireland, and indeed across the United Kingdom, that offer sexual health advice and testing. In addition, more discreet, self-testing kits are available, so we should be looking at some of those things.

Early diagnosis is key to ensuring that treatment can be started quicker. Treatment can reduce the viral load, which means that the disease becomes untransmissible. The hon. Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi) and the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale mentioned HIV in third-world countries, and I agree with their sentiments entirely. The Elim church in my constituency of Strangford deals with people with HIV in Swaziland in Africa, and a choir comes over every year to do some fundraising. Every one of those young children with lovely voices received HIV from their parents when they were young, but the good thing is that they are now HIV-free as long as they have the drugs, so there is a way of going forward.

Charities, agencies and church organisations do their best to provide support. I have seen and understand what they can do. I very much look forward to hearing from the Minister. I hope she can work in parallel with her counterparts in the devolved nations to ensure that we tackle HIV together and meet our 2030 goals.

2.8 pm

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Allin-Khan. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) for his speech and for securing this important debate. It is indeed an honour to take part in it, particularly during National HIV Testing Week, and to follow such excellent contributions from Members from both sides of the room.

I am the Member of Parliament for Cardiff West, so it would be remiss of me not to discuss the proud role that Wales has played in responding to the AIDS epidemic and providing ongoing support to people living with HIV. Indeed, the Terrence Higgins Trust gets its name from a Welshman, who once worked in this place for our friends in *Hansard*. It was co-founded by another Welshman, Martyn Butler OBE, and continues to be the leading charity for supporting people in Wales who are living with HIV, all without an ounce of Welsh Government funding. Without the Terrence Higgins Trust, Wales would not have an HIV action plan and its important 30 actions; without the Terrence Higgins

[Mr Alex Barros-Curtis]

Trust, we would not have this National HIV Testing Week, which brings us together today. So, I pay tribute to the work that the staff and advocates of the Terrence Higgins Trust do.

As has already been said in this debate, what the Prime Minister did this week has set a huge example, not just here in the UK but around the world. By taking an HIV test and destigmatising it by talking about the importance of taking it, he has used his good offices to speak to everyone in our country and around the world, taken down some of the barriers to ordering an HIV test, and let people know that these tests are available.

When the Terrence Higgins Trust polled the general public, 80% of those polled were unaware that testing at home, using a kit sent through the post, was even possible. But when offered that choice against others, home testing was by far the preferred option. Thankfully, in Wales we now have the Labour-run Welsh Government, who provide at-home self-testing kits all year round. Contrast that with England, where such kits are only available nationwide for one week of the year, or, as was said earlier, authority by authority as budgets allow.

Our friends at Public Health Wales are going above and beyond to get kits to people and providing charities, communities and pharmacy partners across Wales with take-home kits that people can send off to receive their results. This is a great innovation that others can learn from. Additionally, in my area GPs are going through their patient lists and texting people to offer tests to those who want them. The Welsh Government have also committed to funding Fast Track Cymru, in order to establish networks across all health boards.

However, one area where Wales is falling behind England is in respect of opt-out testing. Thanks to the Prime Minister's World Aids Day announcement of £27 million in funding, over 50 accident and emergency departments in England are routinely testing for HIV and hepatitis, and that number will rise to 90 by the summer. However, not one A&E department in Wales is yet doing that remarkable and innovative work. So, I ask the Minister if she can join me in working with the Welsh Government to endeavour to change that approach.

I will finish my contribution today with a call for the Minister to unlock a UK-wide problem, namely getting PrEP available outside of sexual health clinics. In Wales, 5,157 people have been prescribed PrEP at some point since 2009, but sexual health is a bottleneck service to start PrEP. For many people, PrEP could be provided online, but for too many people in Wales it is not available online. There are rules and regulations stopping PrEP from being dispensed or even prescribed in community pharmacies. So, I ask my hon. Friend to examine this issue and to use her good offices to tear down these barriers. Otherwise, the 2030 goal will be missed.

2.12 pm

Kevin McKenna (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Lab): It is a pleasure, Dr Allin-Khan, to serve under your chairmanship.

I say a massive thank you to the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) for securing this debate. I thank everyone involved in the all-party parliamentary group on HIV,

AIDs and sexual health, and every organisation that has already been mentioned today, from the Terrence Higgins Trust to the Elton John AIDS Foundation. Actually, I also thank all those small, everyday champions: people who are positive; people who have been allies of people who are positive; everyone who has worked in the bioscience sector; and everyone who has worked in the health sector. This has been a collective effort, involving thousands and thousands of people in this country, to get us to a point where we are potentially only a few years away from eradicating all new transmissions of HIV.

As the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale said in opening this debate, we are also in LGBT+ History Month. In the LGBT community we are used having a lot of clashes, such as Pride happening at the same time as Wimbledon and Glastonbury; we are just used to it.

This debate has put me in a very reflective mood, as did being elected to Parliament and moving from nursing into this world. I was 11 when I realised I was gay; that was in 1985. It was just as everything was hotting up around the AIDS pandemic. It was a pretty scary world to step into. By the time I was properly coming out in the early 1990s, I met lots and lots of friends, including friends and lovers who had AIDS or HIV. I spent a lot of time going to hospitals, and it was there that I realised nursing would be something that suited me. So, it was partly in response to the AIDS epidemic that I was driven along the career path that I was. I also remember the abject terror of getting early HIV tests, particularly before I became a student nurse; a positive test could have stopped that career dead in its tracks at that point.

I will not comment on the age of everyone in this room, but I think like many people in this room I have lived right the way through this pandemic. Of course, by the time I was finally diagnosed with HIV it had changed again, but that was still 20 years on. So I have lived for a long time as an HIV-positive man. There was a time in my life when friends were taking tablets that did have quite severe side effects, some of which were actually very unpleasant and led to them still suffering from HIV and then AIDS. Now, it has whittled down to one tablet a day, and as I get into my 50s it sits alongside my statins and my arthritis medication—all the other medications that we all have at a certain point in our lives. That is the difference.

Florence Eshalomi: I commend my hon. Friend so much for his passionate speech and his lived experience. Earlier this week I attended another event, and the Elton John AIDS Foundation was there. Richard Pyle, one of its directors, mentioned how great it would be if in a few years we could have an injectable form of PrEP. Does my hon. Friend think that that is the advancement we need to see to help address HIV/AIDS?

Kevin McKenna: We already have injectable forms of HIV medication, particularly for people with chaotic lifestyles. They only need to take a jab once every couple of months. It is a real way forward, which will further help us eradicate this.

I have also been reflecting on, in my nursing career, those patients I have nursed for who did not know that they were positive, who became incredibly sick. They developed AIDS without knowing they were positive, coming straight into an intensive care unit and waking

up to find out that they were positive. It was a massive disruption to them and their families, and it was stigma that was driving that. People do not have to live that way; people do not have to suffer that way.

A very strong message today is: everyone, just get tested. Everyone, do it. It is absolutely fine; it is just a little scratch on the finger. There should be no stigma. You will not pass this disease on when you are treated, you will not actually suffer and, honestly, it is boring and mundane. In the community of gay men, it has been very boring and mundane for quite some time. In wider communities, just catch up with the rest of us, frankly. If everyone is tested, we will get there.

The one thing I would say to Ministers is that opt-out testing has been extremely successful. There are diseases out there such as hepatitis C that can be completely eradicated. People do not have to be on a tablet for their whole lives; the course is just a few weeks. If we can identify those people through opt-out testing, we can tackle several diseases with one effort and eliminate those as well. I would like to hear that from the Minister.

2.17 pm

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship for the first time, Dr Allin-Khan. I congratulate my good friend the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) on securing this debate.

The world is a difficult place for many in the LGBT+ community today, at a time when solidarity is necessary and progress is needed. I hope beyond hope that young people in Exeter are not experiencing what I remember as a young gay man before we made such progress under the last Labour Government.

I am heartened that schools such as West Exe school in my constituency have their own Pride celebrations, but I look with sadness at America, where I know that people who are LGBT feel under siege once again. It feels hard, but on a daily basis we remind ourselves that we are not America, we do not live there and he is not our President—in fact, we have very different leadership here. While Donald Trump is showing the example of American power, our Prime Minister is showing the power of our example. I was proud that this LGBT+ History Month and this National HIV Testing Week, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister took an HIV test for the world to see. Not only has that been covered on every channel here, but it has been broadcast across the globe.

Let us be clear. We must tackle HIV infections here in the UK, and this Government are taking a pioneering approach, but it is equally important to tackle infections globally. That relies on an unflinching commitment to defending and extending human rights. The global HIV pandemic has demonstrated the importance of addressing human rights violations as a central pillar of driving down HIV rates.

Studies have consistently found that HIV policies that are grounded in human rights achieve superior results over those that are not rights-based. Among gay men and other men who have sex with men, HIV prevalence is five times higher in countries that have criminalised same-sex sexual acts than in those that do not. Access to testing has improved with decriminalisation. In sub-Saharan Africa, gay men and other men who

have sex with men have double the odds of ever taking an HIV test in countries that have legalised same-sex relations, compared with countries that have not.

Human rights are increasingly under attack from authoritarian Governments and otherwise democratic Governments whose elected leaders choose to vilify minority groups for political gain. That makes it all the more important that the UK Government take a global lead in advocating for human rights, if we want to reach our commitments on eradicating HIV transmission. The UK should work with other like-minded donors, including France, Canada, Germany and the European Commission, to fill some of the gaps in funding that may emerge in the global response. That means ensuring that strong commitments are made to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. On the subject of the Global Fund, I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister stated in an answer just this week to the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) that he has

“long supported it and will continue to support it” —[*Official Report*, 12 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 258.]

I am glad that the Prime Minister also said that he would “share details” as soon as he could.

The UK could help to fill the global gap and agree a joint plan to respond by focusing aid and diplomacy on human rights and building inclusive healthcare systems. The UK could commit to adding HIV to the agenda of meetings with other world leaders throughout 2025. That could include a meeting with President Ramaphosa on the sidelines of the Canadian G7 to agree how best to use South Africa’s G20 presidency to turbocharge prevention of HIV and AIDS. The Government could empower UK ambassadors and high commissioners to prioritise the protection of universal human rights as part of their commitment to tackling HIV/AIDS, and to global health security.

I pay tribute to the Terrence Higgins Trust for the amazing work it does, not only in getting the Prime Minister to test, but in its efforts to get the country back on track to end new HIV cases by 2030. Imagine the victory it would be if we ended this epidemic in the UK—we would be the first country to do so. It would change many lives forever and inspire action everywhere around the world.

2.20 pm

James Asser (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dr Allin-Khan. I thank the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) for securing the debate and for all the work he does on this; it is very much appreciated. We have just had another successful National HIV Testing Week, and I join others in paying tribute to the Prime Minister for his participation. That will be a huge boost in awareness-raising. I also thank the Terrence Higgins Trust for its work on this, and for focusing us on the 2030 goal.

My own campaigning journey started at university more than 30 years ago as we worked to fight the stigma around HIV in what was a very different era, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna) so effectively outlined. Mine—ours—is the generation that came out just after the one that had lost so many to AIDS, into a world before effective

[James Asser]

treatment where so many were still losing their lives. We were, however, on the cusp of the era that now knows living with HIV to be living with a long-term condition. Yes, progress is often fraught with challenges and difficulties, but if we test people, find people who were previously undiagnosed and treat them, they will have a normal life expectancy. How things have changed.

The magnitude of the 2030 goal should never be lost on us. To be a country that ends the onward transmission of HIV is a massive task. Think about how it will change dating and relationships in this country, and think about how it might change how we treat each other. To think that we could be the first country in the world to make that happen—that would have seemed like a miracle to all my friends when I turned 18. It would show British excellence on a global stage, and it would be social justice that was impact-aligned. If we were to achieve such a remarkable goal, it would be the first time we had stopped the onward transmission of a virus without a vaccine and without a cure. We cannot afford to fail.

There is a lot that we should be encouraged by. The proposal has cross-party support, and that is welcome. I pay tribute to the previous Government, which did much to enable opt-out testing in A&Es across the country. We are all delighted to see the new Government back that up with the £27 million announced in December, which will enable this highly effective programme to take place in 90 A&Es from this summer. However, we must acknowledge that our friends in the voluntary sector must continue to reach targets with fewer and fewer resources. We all know the pressures they are under.

Compare the infrastructure for this National HIV Testing Week with what was available when Labour last left office. At that time, the Department of Health and Social Care was making available £4 million for HIV prevention in our communities. Today, the Terrence Higgins Trust and its 30 local partners run everything we see for National HIV Testing Week with just £1.1 million a year. That follows a period in which we have had a cost of living crisis and double-digit inflation. Those are impressive efforts, but they are, ultimately, not sustainable over the longer term.

It is welcome that the Department of Health and Social Care website states that the programme will be commissioned for a further two-year period, but the budget is tight, the pressures are there and we need more than two years. I understand that that is the situation that my hon. Friend the Minister has inherited, but as we get nearer and nearer to 2030, this programme cannot stop. It needs to be ramped up if we are to reach the epic goal and leave no one behind.

I am extremely optimistic about what we can achieve. I know that the Government are committed to achieving more, and I know that my hon. Friend is absolutely dedicated to that. I always like to leave things with a request to the Minister—I know they are all thrilled when I do that—so I urge my hon. Friend to look at what can be done to provide more resources and finances to ensure we hit that vital 2030 target.

2.24 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship on the last day before recess, Dr Allin-Khan. I thank the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) for securing this debate. The fact that he opened the debate is a reminder that HIV is not just an issue in our big urban centres.

In October, I visited Waverley Care's headquarters in Firrhill in my constituency of Edinburgh South West, and I was deeply impressed by their work. Established in the 1980s, Waverley Care bravely opened the UK's first purpose-built AIDS hospice, Milestone House, in response to the emerging HIV/AIDS epidemic in Edinburgh. Milestone House faced initial opposition, reflecting the fear and stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS at the time, which we have heard about. I have heard first-hand accounts of that, including from a former Firrhill high school pupil, who recalled visits to the centre and the subsequent backlash in the media. Work placements had to be ended because of the misleading reporting.

It pains me that, back then, some of the LGBT community found that hate was a barrier to seeking help and testing. It really pains me that today some of the trans community face the same bigotry, and for them it is a barrier to seeking testing and PrEP. We must acknowledge the courage of individuals at the time, and I include in that Councillor John Allan, who represented Oxfangs ward. He wanted the hospice to come to his ward when other councillors were doing all they could to stop it coming to theirs, so I thank him for his leadership.

The turning point in local opposition to the centre came with Princess Diana's visit. She visited many hospices. Her simple act of sharing a cup of tea with a visibly ill young woman sent a clear signal: the patients faced death, but they were still people and worthy of our respect. I do not compare the Prime Minister to Princess Diana, of course, but what he did this week was exactly the same. We who have tested this week and are telling our constituents about it are doing exactly the same—although I have to say that it was harder to get blood out of my finger than I expected.

Since then, remarkable medical advances have transformed HIV/AIDS from a death sentence to a manageable condition. Milestone House is no longer a hospice; it is a hospital. However, as the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale highlighted, the fight is not over. Shamefully, HIV testing in Scotland has decreased by 19% since 2019, and diagnoses are on the rise. Scotland lags behind England, lacking a dedicated HIV testing week and opt-out testing in our high-risk urban centres. The prevalence of HIV in Glasgow and Edinburgh is more than double the trigger level for opt-out testing in England, but that facility is not provided.

Waverley Care rightly highlights that while LGBT communities have strong awareness, heterosexual transmission is now the most common route, often because of lower testing rates. That is why a dedicated testing week and opt-out testing are so important in Scotland. Waverley Care, in partnership with THT, is leading the charge for opt-out testing and an HIV testing week in Scotland, and it has written to the Scottish Government. Those measures have been proven to be effective in England.

Having read the testament from Waverley Care and the Terrence Higgins Trust, I cannot see how Scotland can meet its target of no HIV transmissions by 2030—it just cannot be done. I can only conclude that that is going to make it much harder for the UK Government to hit their own target. Will the Minister therefore write to the Scottish Government to make clear the benefits of an HIV testing week and opt-out testing in our big urban centres, and asking the Scottish Government to follow the UK Government?

2.28 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Allin-Khan. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) on his opening remarks and on bringing this debate to the Chamber.

In the UK alone, around 17,000 lives have been lost to this disease, and despite what many might think, the crisis is not over. We have seen an alarming increase in diagnoses since 2021, and between 2019 and 2023 they rose by 56%. The situation is particularly striking in London. In 2023, our capital recorded the highest new HIV diagnosis rate of any region in England, with 980 people diagnosed for the first time. A further 563 people were diagnosed after initially being diagnosed abroad. The latest estimate is that approximately 107,000 people are living with HIV in the UK, and around 5,000 of them remain undiagnosed and unaware of their condition.

Meanwhile, even though testing rates improved by 8% between 2022 and 2023, they remain 4% lower than pre-covid levels. Although testing among gay and bisexual men has reached record levels, testing rates for heterosexual men are 22% lower than before the pandemic. For women, the picture is not much better: rates are still 10% lower across the board than pre-pandemic levels.

Globally, the situation is critical. We have made significant progress—new HIV infections have dropped by 60% since the peak in 1995—but 39.9 million people were still living with HIV in 2023. Tragically, 1.3 million people were newly infected last year. If we need a reminder that the battle is far from over, that is it. The majority of new infections are concentrated in poorer regions, with sub-Saharan Africa bearing the heaviest burden. In every week of 2023, 4,000 adolescent girls and young women between the ages of 15 and 24 were infected globally, with the majority in sub-Saharan Africa. There is also a disturbing link between conflict, sexual violence and the spread of HIV. In Rwanda, for instance, the prevalence of HIV in rural areas surged from 1% before the 1994 conflict to 11% just three years later. We know that that kind of impact will be felt for generations.

The good news is that there is much we can do, but we have to get on with it. At home, dying from AIDS is no longer an inevitable outcome—indeed, organisations that the hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry) mentioned, such as the Sussex Beacon, which serves both her constituents and mine in Mid Sussex, are now looking to reconfigure services to adapt to changing patient needs—but the alarming rise in HIV diagnoses demands stronger action to expand access to testing, treatment and education for those most at risk. My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I have long called for equitable access to PrEP for all those who can benefit from it, but the Conservative Government's cuts to the

public health grant undermined the delivery of vital sexual health services. The Liberal Democrats are committed to reversing those cuts and investing £1 billion annually to strengthen public health programmes. Among other things, that would help to ensure that we can eliminate HIV transmissions in England by 2030.

We are campaigning for five key things: first, universal access to HIV prevention and treatment; secondly, the eradication of stigma and discrimination tied to HIV and HIV testing—I commend the Prime Minister for making progress on that this week by taking an HIV test, as many hon. Members have mentioned—thirdly, widespread testing and education about HIV; fourthly, a clear path to the elimination of transmission in England by 2030; and fifthly, crucially, the restoration of the public health grant, which was slashed by a fifth under the Conservative Government.

To tackle this problem effectively, we must also look beyond our borders. Despite being preventable and treatable, AIDS remains one of the world's leading killers. The Global Fund has saved millions of lives, but we must keep up the momentum if we are to defeat these diseases for good. The Labour Government have reneged on their manifesto pledge, cutting spending on international aid from 0.58% to 0.5% of gross national income. UK foreign aid has been a lifeline for millions of vulnerable people around the world. Cutting back on that aid is not just a budgetary decision; it is a matter of life and death.

The Government must commit to restoring the aid budget. That is true now more than ever, for over the course of the last month, President Trump has wreaked havoc on the international development space, withdrawing funding and dismantling long-standing international institutions. The harsh reality—that the US can no longer be relied on as an effective partner in delivering support to the areas that need it most—means that the UK must step up.

My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I firmly believe in global solutions to global problems. We believe in the power of international development in building a more peaceful, healthy and prosperous world. Cutting foreign aid is a failure not just to support the world's poorest, but to uphold human rights, and it does not benefit us. The Liberal Democrats remain committed to spending 0.7% of GNI on aid, prioritising developments that help the most vulnerable and align with our strategic objectives, such as gender equality, human rights and access to HIV treatment and sexual health services. The fight against AIDS and HIV is far from over, but by working together and investing in testing, treatment, education and international co-operation, we can and will save lives.

2.35 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Allin-Khan. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) on securing this important debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna) for sharing his lived experience of this condition.

As we mark National HIV Testing Week 2025, we should be proud of the progress we have made since the '70s and '80s in raising awareness of the disease and

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

reducing stigma, but we must reflect on the great challenges that remain in the battle against HIV and AIDS. I pay tribute to charities such as the National AIDS Trust, the George House Trust and the Terrence Higgins Trust, whose work has been at the forefront of the fight against HIV and to improve the nation's sexual health.

The campaign strapline for National HIV Testing Week is "I test"—a message that cannot be repeated enough. Public campaigns such as this have helped to normalise HIV testing as routine and beneficial to both the individual concerned and society at large. Testing is quick, easy, confidential and free. It is the gateway to prevention and treatment and, ultimately, to ending new HIV transmissions. During National HIV Testing Week, anyone in England can order a free postal HIV test, funded by the Department of Health and Social Care and delivered by the Terrence Higgins Trust, as part of the national HIV prevention programme for England. I encourage anyone who is concerned to get such a test and take it.

There has been encouraging progress in reducing the prevalence of HIV across England in recent years. In introducing a national HIV action plan, the last Government sought to achieve an 80% reduction in new infections by 2025. Remarkably, the UK achieved the UNAIDS 95-95-95 targets back in 2020: 95% of individuals living with HIV were thought to be diagnosed, 99% of them were on treatment and 98% were achieving good viral suppression.

A growing proportion of HIV testing has been taking place by post or at home—44% in 2023 compared with 19% in 2019—which shows that the tests are acceptable to the public and welcomed by them. There has been a substantial increase in the number of tests taking place in emergency departments, with 857,000 in 2023 compared with 114,000 in 2019, mostly because of the opt-out testing introduced by the last Government.

We cannot be complacent. Although there have been areas of progress, in recent years we have seen a reversal of hard-won gains in reducing HIV transmission. Data published by the UK Health Security Agency in 2024 shows that the number of heterosexual men and women in England newly diagnosed with HIV has increased by more than 30% since 2022. Around 5,000 undiagnosed people are currently living with HIV in England.

HIV and AIDS cannot be solved in the UK without acknowledging the global context. Last year, AIDS-related illness claimed as many lives as the total of all wars, homicides and natural disasters that have ravaged our planet. In parts of southern Africa, in countries such as Botswana and Zimbabwe, more than a fifth of the adult population is living with HIV. Such figures remind us that the global fight with HIV is far from over.

I was troubled to hear in a House of Lords debate earlier this week that the head of UNAIDS has warned that global HIV infections could increase by more than 600% by 2029 if the US continues to suspend the UN HIV/AIDS programme. That will mean higher infection rates here in the UK, as communicable diseases do not recognise national borders.

Florence Eshalomi: I thank the shadow Minister for highlighting that. Does she share my concern that data and research from the Elton John AIDS Foundation

shows that almost 228,000 people a day will miss out on HIV testing due to the pause in US aid? What should we do collectively, on a cross-party basis, to call that out?

Dr Johnson: The key is to ask the Government what support they will give to the UN and what conversations they are having with their US counterparts about the benefits to people both overseas and at home of ensuring that the battle against HIV and AIDS is won.

Florence Eshalomi: The hon. Lady was formerly the public health Minister, so I know she cares passionately about this issue. Does she agree that HIV has to be a cross-party issue, and that both the Government and the Opposition should be calling out the US pause?

Dr Johnson: It is clear that the battle against HIV is a cross-party issue. We have seen strides and improvements over the years under Governments of different colours. Yes, I was the public health Minister, and we met at an event where I announced the results of the first year of the opt-out testing and its success in reducing infections.

HIV testing is really important. I was pleased to see the Prime Minister test earlier this week; that is helpful in reducing the stigma associated with testing. It showed that anybody in any circumstances can have a test. Opt-out testing has identified cases where people who were thought to be very low risk unexpectedly turned out to be HIV-positive. When we brought in the opt-out testing, we targeted first the A&Es in areas of the highest risk, and we need to continue to target those highest-risk areas.

In October 2024, the Department of Health and Social Care revealed that over half of those with HIV had been previously diagnosed abroad. Will the Department consider the implications of these trends when it puts together its new HIV action plan in order to achieve the goal of no new HIV transmissions in the UK by 2030? Countries such as Australia and New Zealand require applicants to take an HIV test before they obtain a visa. Have there been any discussions between the Department of Health and Social Care and the Home Office about introducing such a requirement in the UK, as we have for tuberculosis?

Guidance from the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities—the Government's own guidance, effectively—suggests that all men and women, and recently arrived children, known to be from a country of high prevalence should be recommended a test. It might be helpful if the Government followed their own guidance, because if we test the high-risk population, we stand more chance of picking up more cases, which would be beneficial.

Under the opt-out testing scheme brought in by the Conservative Government, a patient can explicitly decline instead of explicitly accept an HIV test. It has been rolled out in many A&Es across the country, and I am pleased that it will be coming to more. It has identified hundreds of people who were undiagnosed or lost to follow-up for treatment for HIV, and includes hepatitis B and C. Identification of those cases helps the individuals concerned and helps to reduce transmission across the wider population.

Between 2019 and 2020, the estimated number of diagnosed cases in England declined. However, somewhat counterintuitively, opt-out testing suggests there are more cases than we realise. Does the Minister have

plans to re-estimate the number of undiagnosed HIV cases that may be out in the community waiting to be treated, in the light of the evidence from opt-out testing? The Opposition welcome the Government's commitment to fund opt-out testing until March 2026, but NHS services need clarity on funding beyond that point. Will the Minister clarify whether long-term funding for opt-out HIV testing will be considered as part of this year's spending review?

HIV prevention goes beyond testing. A perennial issue is access to PrEP treatment, to maintain the reduction in HIV cases in England. PrEP has been described as a miracle drug, which prevents HIV-negative people from acquiring the virus, and is a key tool to stop new HIV transmissions by 2030. However, waiting times for PrEP are too long—at one point, they were measured in months rather than weeks. What steps is the Minister taking to improve that? The last Government improved access to PrEP across the country by setting up the PrEP access and equity task and finish group. What steps have been taken to implement the group's recommendations since the Government took office?

We have only one Parliament left to finally eradicate new cases of HIV by 2030. We owe it to everyone who has lost their life to this virus, everyone who has faced the stigma—thankfully, that is reduced but it still exists—of being HIV-positive and everyone who is living with HIV today to end new transmissions once and for all. I hope the Government continue the progress of the last Government with their new HIV action plan, and I hope that it will be developed soon. The former Minister, the hon. Member for Gorton and Denton (Andrew Gwynne), said in November that the plan was in production. I hope that it is getting closer to completion and that the Minister can give us an idea of when it will be complete. I hope that today's debate will inspire thousands of people to get themselves tested.

2.45 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): It is a pleasure to serve for the first time under your chairship, Dr Allin-Khan. This is such a marvellous debate to be part of. The Secretary of State asked me to respond to it on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), who has been attending events this week and unfortunately could not be here today. I have known her a long time and I know that she will be a fantastic champion in this area, coming to the Department every day to do battle on people's behalf.

I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) for securing this important debate and for his continued work in this area. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) in commending the work of the APPG. I know that many hon. Members are caught in the dilemma of the two debates today, and many other people would be here, but I know that they will be listening to the debate with great interest on the fourth day of National HIV Testing Week.

This debate gives me the opportunity to thank all the amazing charities and organisations that are playing such a huge part in making this week a success—the Terrence Higgins Trust, National AIDS Trust, and the Elton John AIDS Foundation, which we have heard about today, to name just a few. I also want to add my voice to the enthusiasm I have seen in my time—nine years now—across

all parties on this issue. There has been a long period of cross-party collaboration. I hope that that continues and that we continue to base our work on evidence and care. It is what has got us here today. My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham and Beckton (James Asser) made that point very well and asked for more resources, so well done him. I will perhaps come on to some of that.

In national testing week, we are making great strides towards the goal of no new transmissions in England by 2030. We are, as many members have said, at a crucial point in that journey. HIV testing has been revolutionised. It is now fast, free and available in the privacy of our own homes—even when our home is No. 10 Downing Street, as the Prime Minister showed us on Friday. I know that that is a powerful message not just in this country but globally, as my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Steve Race) highlighted.

When we normalise testing, we normalise prevention, treatment and care—and we normalise saving lives. I thank every colleague who attended Tuesday's drop-in. It is so important for all of us in this place and elsewhere to help smash the stigma however we can, transform perceptions, and drive us closer to no new transmissions.

Florence Eshalomi: I thank the Minister for making an impassioned speech; she is doing an excellent job. She has highlighted the importance of testing and the fantastic work all the different organisations do in pushing it. Does she agree that for us to reach the vital goal of no new transmissions by 2030, we should be following Wales's example of having year-round access to online testing to help more people test and to eradicate HIV by 2030?

Karin Smyth: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments and her great leadership in her work through the APPG. Some of that work looks very successful, and I will comment on it shortly, because we do need to learn and share from each other.

When it comes to reducing stigma, we have all exposed how old we are in this debate today. I am as old as the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale and perhaps the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and some others. I worked in the health service through the late '80s. It was a gay man who started raising awareness to me about stigma around HIV and AIDS, and we have come an awful long way. The hon. Member for Strangford and my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) rightly talked about the role of the stigma, and that iconic moment with Princess Diana was so important. It was so long ago but to some of us it seems like yesterday.

I can give some updates to colleagues. So far this HIV testing week we have given out 13,308 testing kits. That is 13,308 people who now have the power to know their status, take control of their health and contribute to the fight to end new HIV transmissions in England. Last year, National HIV Testing Week delivered more than 25,000 testing kits, achieving great results among communities disproportionately affected by HIV. For example, the uptake of testing kits for black African communities has tripled since 2021. My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi) made excellent points about that.

[Karin Smyth]

The right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale and my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West tempt me to comment on the Scottish Government's role in this area. Politics aside, they highlighted a serious point about sharing good practice. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Mr Barros-Curtis) made that exact point about the role of the Terrence Higgins Trust. I do not think I knew that Terrence Higgins was Welsh, and I am married to a proud Welshman—something that we share, Dr Allin-Khan—so that looks bad on me. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West made an excellent point about the role of Terrence Higgins's leadership and the people that came after him to lead that organisation. We need to learn from and work with each other. On behalf of the Department, I commit to continue our work across the United Kingdom to share and learn from best practice. I think that my colleagues across the United Kingdom, whatever political party they belong to, would echo that.

As the Minister here in England, I know that the campaign would not be possible without HIV Prevention England, the national HIV prevention programme, which is funded by the Government and delivered by the Terrence Higgins Trust with local partners. The programme aims to promote HIV testing in communities that are disproportionately affected by HIV, bringing down the number of undiagnosed and late-diagnosed cases. Every year, it runs National HIV Testing Week, a summer campaign to raise awareness of HIV and STI prevention and testing, and much more. We are committed to building on those successes, which is why we have extended the programme for a further year until March 2026, backed by an additional £1.5 million.

Looking to the future, we are making progress to end new transmissions before 2030, but we know that much more work needs to be done to reach our goals. We have had some excellent contributions on that today. Our work is not over until every person, regardless of race, sex, sexuality, gender or circumstances, has access to testing without barriers. I hear the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter and others about fear and the historic fear that people have felt. We will not stop until every test is met with care, every diagnosis with treatment and every individual with dignity and respect, regardless of who they are or their HIV status.

Steve Race: Does the Minister agree that although we have a cross-party consensus here today and I accept the words of the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) at face value, the history of HIV action in this country over the last 10 to 15 years paints rather a different picture? We might be closer to eradicating HIV transmissions if the public health grant, which was set in 2014, had had any increases until this Government increased it by 5.5% this year; if the national HIV prevention programme, which started out with a budget of £4 million in 2010, had not had only a £1.1 million budget by last year; if the funding for the HIV helpline had not been abolished in 2012; and if the HIV innovation fund had not been abolished somewhere among the Johnson, Truss and Sunak psychodrama.

Karin Smyth: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham and Beckton made similar points. The level of cuts to our public services and, by implication, to third sector

organisations and their contribution to the fabric of our society—they do work that the public sector cannot get to with groups of people that it cannot get to—is shocking. It was shocking as we went through it. Lord Darzi has given us a good diagnosis of some of those problems. We want to take forward the good work that has been done, but we have inherited a landscape that I wish we had not.

We are very much committed to making progress because we want to build a future where testing is routine, treatment is available to all, PrEP and post-exposure prophylaxis are accessible and no one is left alone in their journey. My hon. Friends the Members for Dartford (Jim Dickson) and for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) talked about the important role of local government and had some fantastic examples.

To support improved PrEP access and many other critical HIV prevention interventions, the Government have provided local authority-commissioned public health services, which include sexual and reproductive health services, a cash increase of £198 million compared with 2024-25—an average 5.4% cash increase and a 3% real-terms increase. That represents a significant turning point for local health services: the biggest real-terms increase after nearly a decade of reduced spending between 2016 and 2024, as my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter highlighted. I hope that starts to put us back on track.

We are pushing that commitment forward by engaging with a range of system partners and stakeholders to develop our new HIV action plan, which we will publish this year. A number of points have been made about what should be included in that plan, and the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire, will hear that and will work with colleagues here and in the Department to ensure the plan is effective.

I extend my sincerest thanks to Professor Kevin Fenton, the Government's chief adviser on HIV, who is hosting engagement sessions and roundtables in parallel with external stakeholders, including the voluntary and community sector, professional bodies, local partners and others. We are also working alongside the UK Health Security Agency, NHS England and a broad range of system partners to inform the development of the new action plan, and guarantee that it is robust, inclusive and evidence-based. This collaboration is essential, because we are fighting not just HIV, but the barriers that keep people from knowing their status. We are fighting stigma, misinformation, and inequality in access to treatment and care.

Achieving these goals requires action, because the future is not just something we wait for; it is something we create. That is why, in December last year, the Prime Minister committed to extending the highly successful emergency department HIV opt-out testing scheme, backed by an additional £27 million, as the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale noted. During the past 34 months, more than 2.5 million HIV tests have been conducted through the scheme, indicatively finding more than 1,000 people who were undiagnosed or not in care. These are not just numbers; they are people we might never have reached who are now empowered with access to critical sexual health services. Increasing testing across all communities is a cornerstone of our new action plan and essential to ending HIV transmissions. That is why we must harness the power of HIV testing week.

Before I wrap up, I join the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) in paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna) for sharing his own experience, which, in motivating his career in nursing—and now his new career—he used to serve and help others. He did that excellently today.

Today, testing is not just about detection; it is about connection. It is about linking people to the care, support and community they need to thrive. It is about ensuring that no one is left behind—and that includes globally. We have committed to supporting the international effort to ending HIV and AIDS, with £37 million towards increasing access to vital sexual and reproductive health services, including HIV testing, prevention and management services for vulnerable and marginalised people across the globe.

Our commitment is unwavering, and our mission is clear. This National HIV Testing Week, let me be clear: a single test can save a life, so let us make testing the norm, the expectation and the action that drives us to a future with no new HIV transmissions.

2.58 pm

David Mundell: I do apologise for the length of my constituency's name, because otherwise we could have had a longer debate. It has been a good debate with some powerful contributions. I, too, commend the hon. Members for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna) and for West Ham and Beckton (James Asser) for reflecting on their personal experiences. It is so important that we do so, and both hon. Gentleman show that it is possible to move on, as someone who is HIV-positive, to play a full part in the world and in Parliament.

I particularly want to refer to a point made by the hon. Members for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) and for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi), which was that this is not just about gay men. There is a stereotype that this is all about gay men. It is not. As we have heard, the statistics show that gay men are among the most prolific in having tests. It is about other communities, and it is about women. That is the message that we have to get across, and that is why opt-out testing is so important.

The hon. Member for Cardiff West (Mr Barros-Curtis) raised my pet subject, which is PrEP. It is ridiculous that, during this debate, I could have emailed somebody in India and obtained PrEP, but I could not go up Victoria Street into a pharmacy and do that. As well as making sure that we continue with the testing initiative, let us make PrEP more readily available.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Cardiovascular Disease: Prevention

[DAVID MUNDELL *in the Chair*]

3.1 pm

David Mundell (in the Chair): Demonstrating my own multifunctionality, I am now going to chair but not participate in the next debate.

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

That this House has considered the prevention of cardiovascular disease.

I do not know where my functionality comes into it, Mr Mundell, but we are doing two debates in a row and it is lovely to serve under your chairship. As I explained in the last debate, I am my party's health spokesperson. I have a lot of interest in this subject; I also declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on respiratory health. Cardiovascular disease is one of the things that the group focuses on.

Back in 2019, the NHS long-term plan defined cardiovascular disease as the single biggest area where the NHS can save lives over the next 10 years. Six years on, that statement still rings true, but I am not sure whether we any closer to arriving at a conclusion. Over 7.6 million people are living with heart and circulatory diseases in the United Kingdom, and CVD is responsible for a quarter of all deaths here every year. It is one of the biggest killers.

I am very pleased to see the hon. Members here, and I thank them for coming. The Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed), is here for the Minister, and I look forward to the Minister's contribution. I am pleased to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans); he and I seem to regularly share debates. I am also pleased to see the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett).

According to predictions from the British Heart Foundation, by 2030 the prevalence of heart and circulatory conditions in the United Kingdom will have increased by 1 million. By 2040, it will rise by 2 million, due to a growing elderly population, the high prevalence of CVD risk factors and improved survival from major CVD events. Cardiovascular disease care in the United Kingdom is most certainly at a critical juncture. That was starkly illustrated by Lord Darzi's recent independent investigation into the state of the NHS; I know that we are all aware of some of the key points of that. The investigation set out how nearly 50 years of progress to improve CVD outcomes has begun to reverse in recent years. That must not happen.

I seek reassurance from the Minister that we are out to stop that reversal. The number of people dying before the age of 75 with CVD has risen to its highest level since 2010, while the association between poor CVD outcomes and health inequalities has also increased, with people living in the most deprived parts of the country being twice as likely to die from CVD as those in the least deprived. Something is seriously wrong when those who just happen to live in a deprived area have a bigger risk of dying than those who do not. The slowing of progress is creating an enormous cost for the NHS and society as a whole, including £12 billion in total healthcare costs and £28 billion across the wider economy due to premature death, long-term care, disability and other informal costs.

[Jim Shannon]

A key challenge relates to the high prevalence of CVD risk factors such as high blood pressure, obesity, diabetes, limited physical activity, air pollution and smoking. I declare an interest as I have had type 2 diabetes for almost 20 years. Mine is controlled by medication and I thank God for that, but I understand the impact on others much worse off than I am.

Raised cholesterol is another significant risk factor, associated with one in five deaths from CVD. Just over half of all UK adults are living with raised cholesterol, significantly increasing their risk of heart attack and stroke. However, due to the lack of immediately obvious symptoms, high cholesterol levels often go undetected. There are concerns that without immediate action there could be a further tidal wave of CVD deaths due to the thousands of “missing patients” living with undetected and unmanaged heart and circulatory conditions.

There are similar challenges in Northern Ireland. I always give a Northern Ireland perspective, which I think replicates what happens here on the mainland; that is why I do it. An estimated 225,000 people are living with heart and circulatory diseases in Northern Ireland—remember that we have a population of 1.9 million; that gives you an idea of the proportions. Since the 1960s, significant progress has been made, with CVD death rates falling by three quarters. But that improvement has plateaued in recent years: some 4,227 people died from CVD in Northern Ireland last year, including 1,133 people under age 75. It is not just an elderly person’s disease. That has to be put on the record.

Annual NHS expenditure on CVD in Northern Ireland is some £290 million—a colossal amount—and CVD’s overall cost to the Northern Ireland economy equates to some £740 million each year. Those are massive figures. I know that we should not look at health from a purely financial point of view, but those figures tell us that if we were working better to combat CVD the impact on the economy and health service would be greatly reduced. Northern Ireland faces similar problems when it comes to identification and management of CVD risk factors, with around 400,000 people living with high blood pressure, including 110,000 who are undiagnosed. Some 45% of adults in Northern Ireland are not performing enough daily physical activity.

In my constituency of Strangford, the prevalence of hypertension, coronary heart disease and stroke is significantly higher than in the rest of Northern Ireland. The reason for that could well be that our population is elderly: people tend to retire to my constituency. Despite the dire figures, there are real opportunities, both in Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom as a whole, to reverse the trends and help the UK become a world leader in CVD, as at one stage it was clearly trying to do. To get there, however, we clearly have to start doing things rather differently. Recent years have seen a number of policy commitments from successive Governments, but those have not shifted the needle, focus or direction. Today’s debate is about highlighting that and seeking help to address the situation.

There was the NHS long-term plan of 2019, which set out ambitions to prevent 150,000 heart attacks, strokes and dementia cases over the following 10 years. Unfortunately, in my constituency and elsewhere there

are high levels of dementia cases, strokes and heart attacks. In Northern Ireland the figures are unfortunately incredibly high.

Successive versions of the NHS annual planning guidance have encouraged local systems to prioritise CVD and address the significant inequalities associated with it. Although the previous Government’s major conditions strategy was not fully implemented, it set out a series of robust principles to improve CVD care, including personalised prevention, early diagnosis, effective management of multiple conditions, integration of physical and mental health services, and services tailored to individual needs. The previous Government’s strategy was clear. I think this Government’s strategy is equally clear, but we need to address some of the issues that I will come to as I go through my speech.

We are lacking a deeply embedded, system-wide approach to CVD prevention that moves care upstream, is backed by sustainable, long-term funding and deploys the latest technologies and innovations. The National Audit Office’s recent report, “Progress in preventing cardiovascular disease”, provided stark evidence that such an approach has been lacking. It focused on the delivery of the NHS health check, which is one of our main tools for enabling early intervention on heart disease. It concluded:

“there is currently no effective system for commissioning Health Checks, despite it being a statutory responsibility on local authorities. DHSC and local government have weak levers to encourage primary care or other services to deliver Health Checks.”

That will be one of my asks of the Minister, who I am pleased to see in his place. I wish him well, and I know I will not be disappointed by his response to our requests.

In 2023-24, only half of the eligible population attended a health check, and only 3% of local authorities covered their entire eligible populations. We have to change that, so my request is that local authorities, which have statutory responsibility, primary care and other services that deliver health checks increase the number of people who get checked.

We need an action plan. The NAO report said:

“This is not a satisfactory basis for delivering an important and potentially life-saving and money-saving contribution to population health.”

Major improvements are needed, and the Government must embed them in a policy environment that promotes prevention rather than treatment. I have always been a believer in prevention rather than treatment. We must diagnose early and prevent disease at an early stage to stop the whole thing going further.

The current approaches do not sufficiently take account of genetics and the role of inherited familial conditions such as familial hypercholesterolaemia and cardiomyopathy in increasing CVD risk. Children are not routinely screened, GPs often fail to take account of people’s family history, and many patients report difficulties in accessing genetic screening.

Patients and doctors need to be empowered to access genetic testing, secure diagnosis and take preventive measures, which will ensure better health for the future and save money in the NHS. I am pleased that the Government have committed an extra £26 billion to the NHS, because right across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we will all benefit from that.

Up to 80% of premature deaths from CVD are preventable—we cannot ignore that figure. Preventing those deaths must be our goal, so the importance of this issue cannot be overstated. The evidence shows that CVD prevention pays. Analysis from HEART UK estimates that merely improving the management of cholesterol, triglycerides and other lipids through increased uptake of NHS health checks and, by extension, increasing the number of patients on lipid-lowering therapies, could deliver more than £2 billion in annual savings for the NHS and wider society.

I will focus on lipid-lowering therapies, because that is a solution that I am keen to see the Government take on board. Although prevention spending is often deprioritised in favour of meeting short-term measures, that is the kind of investment that we need if we are to deliver on the Government's pledge to shift from sickness to prevention. I welcome the Government's commitment to do that; that is what my party and I want.

In recent discussions I have had with stakeholders on this area, they have agreed a number of key themes that will be crucial to delivering progress on CVD prevention. Those include securing dedicated and ringfenced funding for CVD prevention, to enable targeted prioritisation of preventive approaches; identifying at-risk patients through early detection and risk assessment strategies, including testing from birth and family cascade testing; developing comprehensive public awareness campaigns that empower patients to self-monitor—if we can have patients' participation in this as we go forward, that will be much welcomed; increasing access to prevention services by moving them closer to home, including by delivering more community-based diagnostic services; and ensuring timely implementation and consistent application of evidence-based clinical guidelines.

There is growing recognition of the potentially transformative opportunity that can be realised through wider awareness and recognition of another key CVD risk factor: lipoprotein(a), or Lp(a), which is a large lipoprotein made by the liver. Lipoproteins are parcels made of fat and protein. Their job is to carry fats around the body in the blood. Elevated levels of Lp(a) in the blood are an independent, inherited and causal risk factor for CVD, due to its pro-atherogenic, pro-inflammatory and pro-thrombotic effects.

One in five people are estimated to have raised levels of Lp(a) in their blood. That equates to some 13,400,000 people in the United Kingdom—equivalent to filling every seat in Wembley stadium about 150 times. Lp(a) is associated with an increased risk of several life-threatening events and conditions, such as myocardial infarction, heart attack, stroke, coronary artery disease, peripheral arterial disease and heart failure. Sadly, those events are often premature, so we need a way of diagnosing, doing early prevention and doing things better. My ultimate request to the Minister will be that that happens.

In severe cases, which applies to about 12% of the population, raised Lp(a) contributes to a two to four times higher risk of heart attack, stroke and heart disease. The prevalence of raised Lp(a) is typically greater among African and south Asian populations—a trend that is likely exacerbating existing health inequalities even further.

Despite the huge numbers at risk, few people know that they have a raised level of Lp(a). If they did, preventive measures might be taken: they could get a diagnosis, and we could ensure that their lives were better and longer,

as well as reducing the cost to the NHS. The awareness of the role of Lp(a) in contributing to CVD risk is low among the general public and healthcare professionals, so there is a need to raise awareness. With that significant burden comes a huge opportunity to improve outcomes for a so far largely untreated and unserved patient population.

I want to mention my constituent, Dr Paul Hamilton, and also Gary Roulston. They are consultant chemical pathologists at Queen's University Belfast and Belfast health and social care trust. They are leading pioneering work to proactively measure Lp(a) levels in patients who are at risk of CVD. I am always amazed—I always like to say this about Queen's University, and it is right to do so—that when it comes to research and development, it is at the forefront, including on Lp(a). I encourage the Minister to interact with Queen's University. The recent audit of its testing programme has revealed that early measuring of Lp(a) levels leads to a change in CVD management for a large number of patients. That demonstrates that Lp(a) testing and management can be implemented to improve population health and reduce the risk of CVD.

When we look at those things, we see something that can be done even better. Although there are currently no specific therapies for lowering Lp(a) levels, the taskforce believes that there is a clear and growing case for taking action now to incorporate Lp(a) testing and management within mainstream CVD prevention strategies. Several new therapies to lower Lp(a) are currently undergoing late-stage clinical trials, and could well be available in the near future, pending the outcome of those trials. That is a really exciting way forward, and an exciting way to save and improve lives. It is therefore vital that steps are taken to enable system readiness for those therapies and to ensure that the NHS is in the best possible position to maximise their anticipated benefits.

In the interim, there is a growing clinical consensus about the value of identifying patients with elevated Lp(a). In particular, knowing an individual's Lp(a) can inform more intensive management of other cardiovascular risk factors, including blood pressure, lipids and glucose, and empower people to make a lifestyle change to reduce their overall CVD risk. It can also support cascade screening of family and close relatives—again, a positive way forward—given the genetic status of Lp(a). There is clearly a way to use technology and innovation to test more and to do more good for people. Tangible progress in that area could play a key role in supporting many of the key principles that have been identified as crucial to guaranteeing the future sustainability of the NHS, such as reducing pressure in the acute sector, delivering more personalised care and precision medicine, and capitalising on the pioneering innovation led by the UK's life science sector.

More broadly, Lp(a) testing can support the Government's ambitions right here in Westminster to get people back into work, by reducing the incidence of major CVD events, which can prevent people from participating in the labour market. Diagnosis and prevention can support people. To be fair, most people want to work; they want to have a normal life. The ones I speak to are not seeking benefits for any reason other than that they are unable to work.

Without formal recognition of Lp(a) in national policy, the only Lp(a) testing that takes place will be reliant on the work of proactive local clinicians. We need to make

[Jim Shannon]

it the norm; we need to make it acceptable and the way forward. The regional variations are also not acceptable, and local systems need clear direction from the centre to encourage them to start thinking proactively about how Lp(a) testing and management could be incorporated into their local CVD prevention pathways.

What are we seeking? We are looking for a review of current CVD prevention and treatment pathways, for an assessment of where Lp(a) testing could be incorporated to deliver tangible benefits now—not later, but now—and to maximise the benefits of therapies that lower Lp(a), when those become available. We are also looking for engagement with local specialist lipid clinics and clinical laboratories to assess current levels of Lp(a) testing and whether it aligns with agreed best practice and to consider what will be needed to upscale activity in the coming years. We want to encourage local CVD champions to start thinking about the role of Lp(a) in contributing to CVD risk and to disseminate information about Lp(a) within their local networks.

In the taskforce's call to action, it identified several system barriers that are holding back progress in this area; these are also applicable to the success of other health prevention strategies. They include National Institute for Health and Care Excellence procedures and methodology. NICE's guideline methodology needs to take account of wider evidence criteria beyond the ones that apply to a specific treatment. In the case of Lp(a), although specific therapies to lower Lp(a) are not currently available, the taskforce believes that there is none the less a strong case for taking action now to proactively incorporate recommendations on Lp(a) testing and management in NICE guidance. If replicated across other disease areas, that more proactive and anticipatory approach from NICE would help to improve NHS system readiness for new innovations and treatments, encourage healthcare professionals to think more proactively about how a specific risk factor may be contributing to overall risk, and embed a more preventive mindset across the health system, reflecting the significant role of NICE in driving clinical behaviour. If it is possible to make those improvements—it is cost-effective, and early diagnosis will make things preventable—we really need to look at that.

Barriers also include the accuracy of health risk assessments. Risk assessment tools, particularly in CVD, play a crucial role in supporting health prevention strategies. An accurate assessment of an individual's risk of experiencing a major CVD event can inform the most appropriate action to proactively manage and reduce that risk through a combination of treatment interventions and lifestyle changes—each of, us individually, has to play a part.

Going forward, it is vital that existing CVD risk assessment tools are updated to take account of Lp(a) and its known association with a range of life-threatening or life-changing cardiovascular events and conditions. That recognition will be essential to delivering a truly holistic assessment of an individual's cardiovascular risk profile.

It is important to look at the standardisation of testing and reporting. The success of health prevention strategies also depends on the accuracy and consistency of diagnostic processes. In the case of Lp(a), testing

should be conducted according to the best practice principles set out by HEART UK. Has the Minister had a chance to talk to HEART UK, which has some great ideas and positive ways forward? It is important to work in partnership to deliver therapies, diagnoses and prevention.

On emerging therapies, in particular, it is vital that there is a focus on encouraging greater diagnostic standardisation from the outset. Clinicians often get used to the numbers they first use, and it is important that they do not become entrenched in using the wrong, or indeed superseded, units. Without action in these areas, Lp(a) testing and management risks becoming another promising area of health innovation where the UK falls behind comparative systems.

We need to look further afield and to work with other countries; I met the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth, this morning and said the same thing to him. Prominent European and American guidelines, such as those from the American Heart Association, the National Lipid Association and the European Atherosclerosis Society, have set out the importance of considering Lp(a) screening as part of CVD prevention approaches. Some countries are even thinking practically about how universal Lp(a) screening could be introduced. The present approach therefore puts us at risk of missing a rare opportunity to save lives that may be cut short by CVD, and will be increasingly out of line with the Government's focus on transforming prevention across the NHS.

The Lp(a) taskforce is a coalition of experts from across the cardiovascular, lipid and laboratory community, with members from all four nations of the United Kingdom. They have come together to help tackle the lack of awareness and to set out the value of testing for Lp(a) in routine clinical practice to improve CVD management. Chaired by HEART UK, the group published its calls for action in August 2023, and it has since been working with key stakeholders to set out the potentially transformative role that Lp(a) could play in the future and, more broadly, to help renew the UK's status as a world leader. We can be the world leader in CVD prevention and care.

I have some questions for the Minister. Is there a willingness to meet me and representatives from the Lp(a) taskforce, as well as other Members here with an interest in the subject, to discuss the essential steps that need to be taken to ensure that the UK is in the best possible position to integrate Lp(a) testing and management as a core part of CVD prevention strategies? Further, will he commit to engaging with key system partners such as NICE, NHS England and the devolved Administrations to address policy barriers that could hold back progress? I am ever mindful that the Lp(a) taskforce already comprises the four nations of the United Kingdom.

The Government must take wider action through their forthcoming 10-year health plan to secure renewed focus on CVD prevention, underpinned by ringfenced funding, enhanced early detection, expanding community diagnostic capacity, the timely implementation of evidence-based guidelines, and comprehensive public awareness and patient empowerment programmes. Will the Minister explore the scope to develop a dedicated national strategy for cardiovascular disease? We had that in 2019; I believe we need it in 2025.

Reversing these worrying trends in CVD is one of the great healthcare challenges that we face in this Parliament, and it must be approached with the necessary focus and attention. The UK must be able to capitalise on new and emerging areas such as Lp(a), which will be crucial if it is to renew its status as a world leader in CVD prevention and care. Just as with cancer, one in two people in this Chamber today are likely to develop heart and circulatory conditions in their lifetime. Just like the cancer community, the CVD community would welcome a commitment from the Minister to publish a dedicated national CVD strategy. At the end of the day, that is what I am asking for.

3.30 pm

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate. Cardiovascular disease is a phrase heard far too often in family circles, large communities and even on the national scale. Cardiovascular disease is responsible for one in four deaths in the UK, and causes misery to many families. In Dudley alone, 10,000 people are living with heart conditions and circulatory diseases. Across the Black Country integrated care system, 11,000 people are waiting for cardiac treatment; nearly 5,000 have already waited longer than the NHS target. Those numbers translate into our everyday lives—in strokes, peripheral arterial disease, diabetes and heart conditions. Every delay means more emergencies and, tragically, more preventable deaths.

We must act now. Prevention and early intervention are critical to combating cardiovascular disease. We know that obesity, high blood pressure and smoking are risk factors. In Dudley, 30% of adults are living with obesity—higher than the national average—and 16% are smokers still. I welcome the Government's initiatives to tackle smoking and encourage weight loss, and I believe that addressing and diagnosing cardiovascular conditions will help our population to live healthier lives.

It is not just our fantastic doctors who are experts in cardiovascular care but our allied health professionals. AHPs have a big role in diagnosing and managing cardiovascular diseases. As a physiotherapist by trade, I screen for cardiovascular conditions, which can masquerade as musculoskeletal conditions. I check blood pressure and carotid pulse, perform auscultation, check for neurological conditions, and conduct vascular exams and cranial nerve testing of the face. Physiotherapists are involved not only in assessments but in rehabilitation at places such as Action Heart in Dudley, which is inundated with referrals, and where patients get excellent care through cardiovascular rehabilitation and preventive programmes. My podiatry colleagues check for peripheral vascular disease and diabetic foot, and are a fountain of knowledge. My occupational therapist, and speech and language therapist colleagues do exceptional work with stroke patients. My radiology colleagues help with diagnosing these conditions. My paramedic colleagues manage these patients in acute care when they need it the most. An AHP myself, I could talk about AHPs all day but I want to present some recommendations for steps that the Government could take to make a big difference.

First, a multidisciplinary team is important. We should ensure that AHPs are at the centre when making policy decisions and announcements, not just for cardiovascular

conditions but for all conditions; they are not just tackled by doctors. Secondly, we should ensure that diagnosis and check-ups are being done in general practice. Along with GPs, we should look at first contact practitioners, podiatrists, paramedics and physiotherapists, who also work in primary healthcare; and pharmacists, who can do the simple checks to check blood pressure early on. Thirdly, we should provide substantial and ringfenced funding for local health systems to scale up successful CVD risk management programmes. That is essential for us to move forward, and should include cardiovascular rehabilitation and prescription of gym memberships in the community, to ensure that those who need care have structured, long-term support with an emphasis on healthier lifestyles.

We owe it to our communities, to the NHS, and most of all to the thousands of people living with cardiovascular disease to change now. Let us not wait for more lives to be lost.

3.34 pm

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): May I say what an honour it is to serve under the chairmanship of such a multi-talented, multi-functional Chair?

David Mundell (in the Chair): You can speak for as long as you want. [*Laughter.*]

Jas Athwal: I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate.

Cardiovascular disease changes lives, takes lives and robs families of loved ones. I speak from personal experience: my father has been gone for 29 years and my mother for 28 years because of cardiovascular disease, so I know it absolutely robs families of loved ones. Across the UK, cardiovascular disease alone is responsible for one in four premature deaths. Beyond the personal impact it has on families, cardiovascular disease also places an enormous burden on our NHS, costing more than £7.5 billion per year. Preventive medicine and early detection can save lives, keep families together and reduce the burden on our NHS.

While preventive measures can take many different forms, which my colleagues have addressed today, I will focus on early diagnosis, as I know personally how critical it can be. In 2023, having cycled 85 miles on a Sunday, I felt the healthiest and strongest I had ever felt in my life, but one precautionary test taken purely to reassure myself that I was fit shattered my illusions and changed my life, but ultimately saved it. I was diagnosed with chronic heart disease. Within weeks, I had a triple heart bypass. Had I not taken that test, I believe that I would not be here today. Early detection saved my life, and it can save millions more.

In my constituency of Ilford South, a community-based study was conducted across four GP practices by Dr Laskar and Professor Lloyd from Barts hospital. Non-specialist healthcare workers used handheld echocardiogram devices to screen 518 local people. The study found that 22% of those screened were referred for specialist assessments, potentially saving the lives of one in five of those screened. The study in Ilford South demonstrates how we can detect serious conditions early without requiring expensive hospital visits later.

[Jas Athwal]

As my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar) just said, prevention and early intervention save lives. By investing in local healthcare services and using tools such as the handheld echocardiogram device, we can catch problems sooner, treat people faster and relieve pressure on our overstretched hospitals sooner. Early diagnosis is not just a medical advantage, but lifesaving. It delivers more time with loved ones, less strain on our NHS and a future in which fewer lives are cut short. We have a golden opportunity to prolong life and to give the gift of life, and I urge the Minister to grab it with both hands.

3.38 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on his characteristically detailed and impassioned speech in opening the debate.

Cardiovascular disease, or CVD, affects around 7 million people in the UK, making it a significant cause of both disability and premature death. As the hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) just shared, its impact is felt by many of us. In my family, my paternal grandfather, Lance, died of a heart attack in his 50s, and my maternal grandfather, Bill, died of an aortic aneurysm in his 80s. Thirteen years ago my father, Hugh, had a triple heart bypass. Happily he survived, and he is doing well 13 years on. I am enormously grateful to the NHS for what it did to save my father's life, but much more needs to be done to prevent the impacts of cardiovascular disease on so many people in the UK.

We know that there is a huge variety of causes of cardiovascular disease. One cause, for which we have the solutions, is socioeconomic disparities. The truth is that those who live in the most deprived areas of our country are at far greater risk. People in the 10% most deprived communities are almost twice as likely to die from CVD as those in the least deprived areas. Clearly, there is work to do to close this gap. It is unfathomable to me that in a small and supposedly prosperous nation, a man living in Kensington and Chelsea can now expect to live 27 years longer than a man in Blackpool. That is not just alarming; it is unjust. The disparity worsens when we consider those who have severe mental illness. For people with extreme mental illness, their life expectancy is 15 to 20 years less than that of the general population, and they have a 53% higher risk of developing CVD.

The previous Conservative Government's lack of support exacerbated these health disparities. Public health funding was cut by 26% in 2015, leaving local authorities unable to provide vital services. With the new Government showing some signs of making genuine investment in the right places, I believe this situation can change—indeed, it must change.

My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I are committed to creating a healthier and more equal society. The UK has long been known for its grassroots sports, high-quality food production and world-leading medical research. We should be one of the healthiest countries in the world. Under the previous Conservative Government, however, the country became sicker, lagging far behind our international peers. That is why the Liberal Democrats

are calling on the new Government to take urgent action to support people in leading healthier lives by reversing the Conservative cuts to public health funding. I firmly believe that improving public health is not just about treatment—far from it, in fact. It is also about empowering people to live healthier lives, creating healthier environments and supporting communities to make decisions that improve their health. In doing these things, we will take pressure off overburdened systems and create a more resilient population.

There are several steps that we propose to address the current situation. First, there should be a reversal of cuts to the public health grant, enabling local authorities to provide essential preventive services. Secondly, a proportion of the public health grant should be set aside for those experiencing the worst health inequalities in order to co-produce plans for their communities. Thirdly, a health creation unit should be established in the Cabinet Office to lead work across Government to improve the nation's health and tackle health inequalities.

Our vision for the future also includes tackling the obesity crisis. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence found a direct correlation between deprivation and obesity in both adults and children. That is why we are calling for an end to the two-child limit and the benefits cap, which would lift over 500,000 children out of poverty. We would also expand free school meals to all children in poverty and work to ensure that every child in primary school has access to a healthy meal. We must also protect our children from the harmful effects of ultra-processed food advertising, and encourage healthier lifestyles by supporting walking and cycling. Our transport networks need to be redesigned to prioritise active travel and road safety, ensuring that every community can access safe spaces for walking and cycling.

My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I are committed to making the UK a healthier and fairer place to live. We know that investment in prevention, public health and primary care is key to tackling the root causes of cardiovascular disease and improving the lives of millions across the nation. This issue is solvable and we have the answers. We just need to act.

3.44 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Before I start my speech, I think it was Gandalf who said:

“A wizard is never late...Nor is he early; he arrives precisely when he means to.”

I think it is correct protocol to be here at the start of a debate, although I for one would certainly like to see the Minister sprinkle his magic on this topic, because I hope that he will provide some enlightening answers in response to such an important debate.

Once again, I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his industrial strength in always securing these debates. I believe it is said that the man who moves a mountain begins by carrying away small stones; the hon. Member for Strangford is moving the metaphorical health mountains, one Westminster Hall debate at a time. I raise my hat to him, because I have had the chance to respond to a debate of his at least half a dozen times. He always conducts himself in an incredible manner and provides incredible detail, so I thank him for that.

If we can tackle the risk factors behind cardiovascular disease and identify it at an early stage, we can make a significant difference by reducing the number of people lost to premature deaths every year. The hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) spoke movingly about his mother and his father. That was followed up by the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett), who spoke about her father 13 years on; her father will be very proud to see his daughter in this debate. I am sure the parents of the hon. Member for Ilford South would be proud of his achievements as well, and the fact that he is raising such an important topic.

I come to this topic as a GP, and this is pretty much the bread and butter of life for a GP: advising on healthy lifestyles, and managing blood pressure, angina, obesity, smoking, heart failure, strokes and many more conditions. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar), who pointed out how important that is. It is not just the doctor's role any more; this is the MDT approach, and actually a quality MDT really helps the GP to understand where they need to look and to manage their workload, which is so important not just for clinicians but, most importantly, for the patients. It is an honour to take part in this debate and to help to shape it.

From a public health perspective, the last Government made significant progress on things such as calorie labelling, salt and sugar reformulation and smoking cessation, which are all contributors to cardiovascular disease. It was just three years ago that the NHS published its CVD prevention recovery plan, which set out four high-impact areas for every part of health services to focus on risk factors, detection and management. Examples include the rolling out of blood pressure checks in high street pharmacies and allowing people to measure blood pressure at home. The NHS long-term plan set out five ambitions to detect and treat people at risk of developing CVD. The plan has been revised twice, in 2022 and 2024.

This work was reinforced by the introduction of the NHS digital health check in spring 2024, which aimed to prevent 400 heart attacks over four years. The National Audit Office report into CVD, which was published in November 2024, said the disruption to the NHS caused by the covid pandemic has had substantial impacts on elective care, and this has undoubtedly had an impact on the prevention and treatment of cardiovascular disease. We do not have to look back too far to think about lockdown and the effect that that had on people's physical activity, their ability to seek help and some of the preventive and advisory medicine that would have normally taken place. Following the NAO report, the Government committed to reviewing the NHS health check programme. Will the Minister confirm the timescales for the review and when the reports on the outcome will be published?

The hon. Member for Strangford rightly pointed to cholesterol and lipids. Lipids are often not given the attention needed; they are hugely important when addressing cardiovascular disease, so I thank the hon. Gentleman for mentioning them. I have done constituency casework on this topic as a Back-Bench MP. He mentioned lipoprotein(a), and I have been questioning Ministers about the development of genetic testing for familial hypercholesterolaemia and the development of a familial hypercholesterolaemia service in Leicestershire. Although this is a complicated and involving space, given the

great advances in the testing and understanding of lipids, it is really important that we get to the bottom of it to understand the environmental impacts that are causing this, as well as the genetic ones at play.

To that end, work has also included looking at how bodies can track patients and the difficulties that familial hypercholesterolaemia services have in cascading to local people's relatives, which I think is what the hon. Member for Strangford was pointing to. This is probably beyond the scope of this debate, but given the hon. Gentleman's success with this debate, it would be great if he were to secure a Back-Bench debate on lipids. Will the Minister consider asking the Department to look at improving the clinical pathways for familial hypercholesterolaemia and the possible roll-out of screening for both patients and family members? I appreciate that this has to be done through an evidence-based approach.

More people are living with multiple long-term conditions; that is no different for many people living with CVD, who are also living with other conditions, such as diabetes. That is why the last Government were developing the major conditions strategy to try to improve outcomes across major conditions, including cardiovascular disease, as well as cancer, diabetes, respiratory disease, mental health and musculoskeletal disorders. Since the general election, Ministers have decided to go in a different direction, so will the Minister reassure me that the NHS 10-year plan will address the impact of those long-term conditions? As the hon. Member for Mid Sussex pointed out, inequality plays a role when it comes to cardiovascular disease, so I would be grateful if he would comment on that.

I think the quote goes, "Study the past if you would divine in the future," and I am always keen to gain insight from across the House of what has previously happened. I note that almost a year ago today, there was a debate held in the main Chamber on the topic of heart and circulatory diseases by the then MP for Watford, the brilliant campaigner Dean Russell, who talked about his experience of having a heart attack. Of course, the debate was just a few months before the general election, but it gives us a good insight into what the then shadow Health team were thinking before they came into government, which they were successful in doing. The then shadow Minister, now the Minister for Secondary Care, was responding. She said:

"Labour has a mission to reduce deaths from heart attacks and strokes by a quarter within 10 years...Under our 'Fit for the Future' fund, we would double the number of scanners—speeding up heart and circulatory disease diagnosis".

What is the amount in that fund? Has it been deployed, and what is the timescale? What scanners were specifically commissioned for cardiovascular disease? The then shadow Minister went on:

"We would also incentivise continuity of care in general practice, which would improve care in our communities for people living with heart and circulatory disease."—[*Official Report*, 22 February 2024; Vol. 745, c. 940.]

No one has to tell me, as a GP, about the importance of continuity of care, so will the Minister explain what this would look like in the GP contract? What incentivisation is being considered for GPs?

The then shadow Minister went on:

"That is why Labour will introduce a child health action plan that will put prevention at the top of the agenda".

[Dr Luke Evans]

Forgive me, but looking on the Government's website and speaking to the House of Commons Library, I cannot see a report or plan on this topic; if I have missed it, will the Minister provide it? If there is not one, will the Minister set out the goals and timelines for achieving the plan, if the Department will provide them, and place it in the House of Commons Library?

On research, the then shadow Minister went on:

"That is why Labour's regulatory innovation office would make Britain the best place in the world to innovate by speeding up decisions and providing a clear direction based on our modern industrial strategy, alongside a plan to make it easier for more patients to participate in clinical trials."—[*Official Report*, 22 February 2024; Vol. 745, c. 941.]

Eight months into the new Government, I believe a chair has not been found, so will the Minister update me on when the role will be filled? Given that this was the stated aim of the Labour party in the CVD debate, what conversations is he having with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology about speeding up cardiovascular trials?

I thought it fitting in closing to use the lines of Dean Russell, who used his closing remarks back then to point to the importance of data, education, protection and research in dealing with cardiovascular disease. I think the entire House can get behind that. The story of the hon. Member for Ilford South is a testament to the life advice that Dean gave to us then:

"if anyone at home is worried, they should get checked. If they are concerned that they have symptoms, they should get them looked at. It is better to get rid of fears before the event than to wait for them to become a reality and have to deal with the outcomes of that."—[*Official Report*, 22 February 2024; Vol. 745, c. 944.]

I think we can all agree on that, too.

David Mundell (in the Chair): I am sure that the Minister will begin with an apology to me, to Mr Shannon, as the Member in charge, and to all other participants, because it was very clear on the Order Paper that these proceedings would begin at 3 pm.

3.54 pm

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. I am indeed starting with an apology. I am very embarrassed by the fact that the debate was put by my officials in my diary as starting at 3.30 pm, and it is completely unacceptable that I arrived late. I apologise to you, Mr Mundell, and to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). It is a very embarrassing situation, and I am not happy about it at all.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford for securing this debate on such an important issue and for the vital work he does as the chair of the APPG on vascular and venous disease. For their excellent contributions, I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar), who spoke powerfully on the basis of her extensive real-world experience and expertise, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal), who spoke so movingly about his family and personal experiences, and the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett), who spoke passionately about the shocking health disparities that blight our country, caused by 14 years of Tory neglect and incompetence.

Before I begin my remarks, I want to pay tribute to people working in local government, our NHS staff and GPs up and down the country for their efforts to find, treat, and manage people at risk of cardiovascular disease—also known as CVD. As hon. Members will know, health is a devolved issue, so my remarks will be limited to matters in England; however, I am happy to pick up on many of the broader points that the hon. Gentleman for Strangford has made.

The last Labour Government made significant progress on reducing premature deaths from CVD through the introduction of big-hitting interventions such as the ban on smoking in public places and increases in statin prescribing. However, as the hon. Member for Strangford said, among the many appalling findings of Lord Darzi's report, there is clear evidence that progress on CVD stalled, and even went into reverse in some areas, between 2010 and 2024. That is why it is this Government's mission to invest in the health service, alongside fundamental reform to the way that healthcare is delivered. We will build a health and care system fit for the future by moving from sickness to prevention, hospital to home, and analogue to digital. Tackling preventable ill health is a key part of these shifts.

As part of our 10-year health plan, we are committed to helping everyone to live a healthy life for longer, and as the hon. Gentleman also outlined in his remarks, too many lives are cut short by heart disease and strokes. In 2022, one quarter of all CVD deaths in the UK occurred among people under the age of 75. Tackling CVD is not just the right thing to do for patients; CVD is also having an impact on growth. People with CVD are more likely to leave the labour market than people with poor mental health, and we must dispel the fiction that people with CVD are always old and infirm. Around one in three people who have a heart attack, one in four people who have a stroke, and two in five people with coronary heart disease are of working age.

The hon. Gentleman referred to premature deaths, and we know from the most recent figures that I have, from 2023, that in England alone over 130,000 people died from CVD and over 30,000 people died before they turned 75. The best estimates show that the annual cost of CVD to the NHS is a staggering £8.3 billion, with knock-on effects of £21 billion to the wider economy. This is a huge challenge, which is why we are meeting it with great ambition: to reduce premature deaths from heart disease and stroke in people under 75 by one quarter within a decade. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), will be spearheading our work in this area, and will also be picking up on many of the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised in his speech.

We know that around 70% of the CVD burden is preventable and due to risk factors such as living with obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and smoking—all of which can be reduced by behaviour changes, early identification and treatment. In England, the NHS health check is a free check-up for people between 40 and 74. The NHS health check is a wide-reaching programme delivered by local authorities in England. This CVD prevention programme aims to prevent heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and kidney disease—and also dementia for older patients.

In the very short period of time that I have left, I just wanted to say that the hon. Member for Strangford called for the introduction of Lp(a) tests. As I understand it, lipoprotein(a) measurement is not currently recommended by NICE guidance, and there are no treatments available that specifically target Lp(a). Instead, our focus is to improve the uptake of lipid-lowering therapies for prevention of CVD and to treat people with established CVD to NICE treatment targets. We will look closely at new tech and innovation and the essential role they will play in reducing health inequalities.

Jim Shannon: I apologise, but at the end of my speech I asked for three things. I asked whether there would be a willingness to meet me and representatives from the Lp(a) taskforce to discuss the essential steps that are needed, and that—

David Mundell (in the Chair): Mr Shannon, I remind you that these proceedings go on to 4.30 pm, so there is no need for you to try to speak in a very short period of time.

Jim Shannon: I will not test your patience by speaking till 4.30 pm, Mr Mundell—I would test everybody's patience if I were to do that—but could I sum up, if that is okay?

David Mundell (in the Chair): Yes. That is what I was saying, but I felt you were summing in a way that anticipated that we were concluding at 4 pm.

Jim Shannon: I would have asked to intervene, but the Minister had sat down.

First, I thank all Members for coming along. The hon. Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar) set the scene incredibly well with her knowledge and experience through her work—I think the Minister also referred to real-world experience. I thank her for her contribution; she is certainly establishing a name for herself in the Chamber.

There is no better way of illustrating a point than by telling a personal story, as the hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) did. It reminds me of one of my constituents who came to see me one day; he is a man I know very well, although he is in a different political party. I asked him how he was and he said, “Jim, I went to see my doctor; I thought I was okay, but before he finished the tests on me, he gave me a bit of paper. I said, ‘What’s that for?’ and he said, ‘You have to go hospital right now.’” He went and had a quadruple bypass—he thought he was perfectly healthy, and did not know that he was not. I thank the hon. Member for Ilford South for sharing his story earlier.

The hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett) very clearly underlined the differential—that someone in Kensington and Chelsea can live for 20 years longer than someone in Blackpool. That has got to be wrong; we have to address those issues. She also mentioned the issue of obesity in children, and said that better food and school meals would improve public health and help to deliver more resilient people.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), referred to genetic testing and to the cascading of those tests right down through families, which is one of the things that I asked for. He referred to the 10-year plan, of which the long-term

condition of CVD needs to be a part. The aims of the Government seem to indicate that there will be a wish to do those things in relation to CVD, and we very much hope that the Minister can do them.

I thank the Minister for arriving—look, things happen in life. Sometimes I am late as well, which is probably my fault on most occasions and I take the blame. On this occasion, I asked the Minister for three things, and I will repeat them now. Is the Minister willing to meet me and representatives from the Lp(a) taskforce to discuss the essential steps that need to be taken now to ensure that the UK is in the best possible position to integrate Lp(a) testing? Will he commit to engaging with key system partners such as NICE, NHS England and the devolved Administrations to address relevant policy barriers that could hold back progress? I am ever mindful that the Lp(a) taskforce has already integrated the four nations of the United Kingdom in what it is doing. I always try to be positive—you know the person I am, Mr Mundell. My objective is not to catch anybody out; I only want positivity and a solution-based approach to what I am asking for. My last question was: will the Minister explore the scope to develop a dedicated national strategy for cardiovascular disease?

Those are my three requests, which I put forward genuinely, sincerely, honestly and kindly. I ask the Minister to let us all know his response and his policy, because I think that other Members, from all parties, would also like to know.

David Mundell (in the Chair): I am sure the Minister will have heard the three points that Mr Shannon raised. On that basis, I will put the Question.

Dr Evans: On a point of order, Mr Mundell. In perfect symmetry, this debate has taken a somewhat different procedural pathway than usual; that is indeed what can happen to patients with cardiovascular disease—things surprise them, although we have systems for dealing with cardiovascular disease. My concern is that some of the questions I raised on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition have not had the chance to be answered. I would be grateful if the Minister would take them away and write to me—perhaps I could put them in a letter. Would it be within the scope of the Chair's powers to allow that to be the case, Mr Mundell?

David Mundell (in the Chair): That is not technically a point of order, but I am sure the Minister has heard what you have had to say. I am sure he and, indeed, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed)—who was here from the start—will have noted all the points that Mr Shannon raised. If the points that Mr Shannon raised at the end—and indeed earlier, in his contribution before the Minister spoke—were unaddressed, I am sure that the Minister will write to him.

Stephen Kinnock: I absolutely will. I would be happy to complete my remarks, but I do not know that would work, given that Mr Shannon has made his second contribution.

David Mundell (in the Chair): I will make the determination that Mr Shannon's contribution was an intervention—although an excessively lengthy one, which he will not repeat at the conclusion of the debate.

Stephen Kinnock: This has been an interesting debate on so many levels. I thank you for that clarification, Mr Mundell.

I was just talking about the fact that around 70% of the CVD burden is preventable, and that the causes include obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and smoking. All those factors can be reduced by behaviour changes, early identification and treatment. In England, the NHS health check is a free check-up for people between 40 and 74. It is a wide-reaching programme delivered by local authorities in England. This CVD prevention programme aims to prevent heart disease, stroke, diabetes and kidney disease, as well as dementia for older patients. It engages over 1.4 million people a year and, through behavioural and clinical interventions, prevents around 500 heart attacks or strokes annually.

I agree with the hon. Member for Strangford that the National Audit Office report shows that there is still so much more to be done. That is why we have asked officials to be more ambitious, developing policy proposals for how that programme can go even further. In the meantime, we are focused on delivering a new digital NHS health check, available through the NHS app, so that people can assess, understand and act on their CVD risk at home. We want to make it easier for people to access that programme, especially our constituents who have caring or childcare responsibilities, or cannot easily get to their GP surgery during opening hours. The creation of a state-of-the-art national digital NHS check service will improve access to this lifesaving check.

The hon. Member was right to mention diabetes as a key risk for CVD. Each year, the NHS health check identifies 22,000 people with high blood sugar who are referred on to primary care for further assessment and management. GPs can refer people at risk of developing type 2 diabetes into the Healthier You NHS diabetes prevention programme. The programme has been highly effective: some 35,000 people have been referred to it by their GP, and over 20,000 have started the programme since September 2020. For people who complete that programme, it can cut the risk of developing type 2 diabetes by 37%. For those who already have diabetes and are overweight or obese, the NHS type 2 path to remission programme is available. This joint initiative between NHS England and Diabetes UK aims to support eligible people with type 2 diabetes to achieve clinically significant weight loss, improve blood glucose levels and reduce the need for diabetes-related medication. A recent study found that almost a third of patients with type 2 diabetes who completed the programme went into remission.

Around half of heart attacks and strokes are a result of high blood pressure. A third of adults have high blood pressure and, worryingly, almost a third of these conditions are currently untreated, meaning that over 4 million people do not know that they have high blood pressure. It is often referred to as the silent killer, as high blood pressure is largely symptomless. The tragedy is that the treatment is so cheap and effective. We could prevent around 17,000 heart attacks and save more than £20 million in healthcare costs alone over three years just by treating 80% of patients on target.

The hon. Member for Strangford also mentioned high levels of cholesterol as a key risk factor in CVD. For every three NHS health checks delivered, one person is found to have high cholesterol, and there are well-known health inequalities in CVD affecting underserved

communities in England. Addressing undetected and poorly managed high blood pressure and raised cholesterol is key to preventing CVD and reducing health inequalities.

There are effective drug treatments. Statins are readily available and very cheap. They can reduce an individual's risk of CVD in four to six weeks. If we improve treatment rates for people with CVD to 95%, more than 18,000 CVD events, such as heart attacks and strokes, may be prevented over three years. We will look closely at how we can get that done. The hon. Member for Strangford called for the introduction of Lp(a) tests. As I mentioned, that is not currently recommended by NICE guidelines. I have taken account of his other remarks, including his request for a meeting and engagement with system partners. The Minister for Public Health and Prevention will take all those requests on board. She is the right person for him to meet, given that she leads in this policy area.

Smoking costs health and care services £3 billion a year—resources that could be freed up to deliver millions more appointments, scans and operations. The cost of smoking to our economy is even greater, with around £18 billion lost in productivity every year. Smokers are a third more likely to be off work sick, which is why we introduced the Tobacco and Vapes Bill: the biggest public health intervention in a generation. It will break the cycle of addiction and disadvantage, and put us on track towards a smoke-free UK. That will make a real difference in constituencies where smoking contributes to the cycle of poverty and ill health. We are also supporting local stop smoking services with an additional £70 million this financial year.

Today's debate has shown what a challenging and complex area this is. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), raised a range of issues. I will ask the Minister for Public Health and Prevention to write to him on all his points, many of which I think would be best dealt with in correspondence.

Jas Athwal: The Minister makes powerful points. Does he agree that we should consider a wider, holistic approach, taking into account planning and advertising—for instance, children going to school and having access to the proliferation of chicken shops and fast-food shops, and being exposed to, on average, 13 to 15 junk food adverts? That would help to limit the number of heart diseases later down the line.

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is right that prevention should focus on as early as possible in the life of our young people. Bad habits form at early ages. That is not helped by the behaviour of some aspects of our economy, and the way in which products are advertised. It is essential that we move to a model of prevention that is a partnership between the Government, our communities and business. We are taking action against the advertisement of certain products before the 9 o'clock watershed. We are also cracking down on energy drinks, which are really pernicious in terms of the amount of sugar, caffeine and other deeply unhealthy components they contain.

My hon. Friend is right that we are genuinely all in this together. We need that partnership with the private sector, and a change in mindset around healthy and nutritious food. That needs to be put into schools

through community health, and through working with parents and communities to change the habits of our country. We have a gargantuan challenge ahead of us, but our Government are absolutely committed to facing it, and that prevention strategy will be at the heart of our 10-year plan. It is one of the key shifts from sickness to prevention.

That leads me to my closing remarks. We have seen today what a challenging and complex area this is. It is a challenge that requires sustained action on a number of risk factors, but I assure colleagues that this Government will leave no stone unturned in getting premature deaths from heart disease and stroke down by a quarter for people under the age of 75 within the next year.

In my contribution, I have sought to demonstrate our commitment to getting on with the shift from sickness to prevention with our cast-iron commitment to expanding NHS health checks, the shift from hospital and community by making it easier for people to get checks at their convenience and at home, and the shift from analogue to digital through an innovative and expanded digital service. I once again thank the hon. Member for Strangford for securing this important debate, and thank all hon. Members across all parties for their excellent contributions. Watch this space: we will continue to work on this issue with focus and at pace.

David Mundell (in the Chair): Mr Shannon, do you wish to make a final contribution?

4.16 pm

Jim Shannon: I am not quite sure what happened today, but I thank everyone—the Minister, all the hon. Members who made a contribution and the Backbench Business Committee for making this possible. We look forward to the delivery that the Government have indicated for the years ahead, on which all the nations of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can work together.

David Mundell (in the Chair): It has been a little unconventional, but we got there in the end.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the prevention of cardiovascular disease.

4.16 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 13 February 2025

CABINET OFFICE

National Procurement Policy Statement

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Georgia Gould): Today the Government are publishing a national procurement policy statement that sets out our priorities for public procurement and maximises the impact of every pound spent. This will come into effect alongside the commencement of the Procurement Act 2023 on Monday 24 February. The Government are determined to ensure that the £400 billion of public money spent on public procurement annually delivers economic growth, supports small businesses, champions innovation, and creates good jobs and opportunities across the country.

For too long, small and medium-sized enterprises and voluntary, community and social enterprises have been held back by Government procurement processes that are too slow, bureaucratic, and difficult to navigate. Therefore, today, the Government are also announcing new measures to support the transformation of public procurement and deliver on the Government's plan for small businesses.

New rules will require all Government Departments and their arm's length bodies to set three-year targets for direct spend with SMEs (from 1 April 2025) and VCSEs (from 1 April 2026) and publish progress annually. On top of this, regular spot checks will ensure smaller companies in the supply chain are paid within 30 days. This builds on previous interventions in the Budget that require Government Departments to exclude suppliers from bidding for major contracts if they cannot demonstrate prompt payment of invoices. We will be reforming the way social value is taken into account in central Government procurement, streamlining the current model to focus on delivery of our missions, and taking forward new standards on fair work in support of our growth mission.

The new national procurement policy statement sets out an expectation for the public sector to maximise procurement spend with SMEs and VCSEs. It sets out how early market engagement and collaboration combined with a clear pipeline of projects can help deliver this. To support local businesses the Government have listened to concerns from local authorities and are working to implement changes to allow them to reserve competitions for low-value contracts for local small businesses and social enterprises.

A new commercial innovation hub will foster procurement innovation by trialling new approaches to service design and procurement. Delivering on the commitment in the blueprint for modern digital government, we will explore establishing a digital commercial centre of excellence bringing together digital and commercial expertise to make it possible to buy once and well, and to open up opportunities for small and medium businesses to work on digital transformation.

This Government are clear that we want the value of contracts to go into delivering for citizens, and are making changes to deliver value for money in procurement through stronger expectations around commercial capability and contract management. A new online register of commercial agreements will increase visibility of frameworks and fees, curbing excessive profits. We will deploy new artificial intelligence commercial tools to cut bureaucracy, boost productivity, and free up commercial staff for higher-value tasks.

To build on this progress, the Government will consult on further reforms to our public procurement processes to drive economic growth, support small businesses, and better support innovation. This consultation is intended to inform the development of primary legislation when parliamentary time allows.

The Government will update their sourcing playbook and consult on introducing a new public interest test for contracting authorities to assess, at the outset of a procurement process, whether work should be outsourced or if it could be done more effectively, and drive better value for money, in house. This will strengthen market stewardship in procurement and ensure there is a rigorous evaluation of the broader public interest of in-house, outsourced or hybrid delivery models, ensuring that decisions properly reflect long-term value for taxpayers and are aligned with Government priorities.

This transformative package of reform ensures public procurement delivers real benefits for taxpayers, businesses and communities alike. By setting ambitious targets for small business spend and aligning social value with our missions, we are driving economic growth, strengthening supply chains, and fostering innovation. By maximising the power of public procurement, we will fuel job creation around the country, drive local and national outcomes and ensure that every pound spent delivers the maximum value for the people of this country.

[HCWS449]

TREASURY

Contingencies Fund Advance: National Savings and Investments

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds): HM Treasury has agreed additional resource DEL and capital DEL funding of £88,414,000 for National Savings and Investments (NS&I) as part of spending review 2025 phase 1 during the 2024 autumn Budget. The additional resource supports NS&I's business transformation programme which will see it transition to a modernised operating model, with multiple service delivery partners. The funding also supports the capital DEL requirements for NS&I's moving between offices in London.

Parliamentary approval for additional resource of £40,630,000 and capital of £17,120,000 has been sought in a supplementary estimate for NS&I. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £57,750,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS453]

Bank of England and Treasury: Financial Relationship

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds): I can announce today the conclusion of a Bank of England and HM Treasury five-yearly review of the Bank's capital framework parameters, as set out in section 2B of the Bank and HM Treasury financial relationship memorandum of understanding.

The review concluded that:

The capital framework has been effective in delivering its intended objectives at inception in 2018: to ensure that the Bank is equipped with capital resources consistent with the monetary and financial stability remits it has been given by Parliament.

The existing parameters of the capital framework remain adequate to support the Bank's balance sheet.^[1]

The existing Bank-HMT financial arrangements, as set out in the MoU, are sufficient to support the bank's planned transition to a demand-driven operating framework fully backed by repo.^[2]

The Bank and HM Treasury will keep these arrangements under review during the Bank's balance sheet transition to a new steady state in coming years, ensuring close engagement as per the existing governance and information sharing channels set out in the MoU.

The Bank and HM Treasury have updated the MoU accordingly, and this can be accessed at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/memorandum-of-understanding-between-hm-treasury-and-the-bank-of-england-2025>

^[1] The parameters of the capital framework include a target, a floor, and a ceiling. As set out in the 2018 letter from the Governor of the Bank of England to the Chancellor, the values of the capital parameters are £0.5 billion for the floor, £3.5 billion for the target and £5.5 billion for the ceiling. This letter can be accessed at <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/-/media/boe/files/letter/2018/governor-letter-210618.pdf>

^[2] Further detail on the transition of the Bank's operating framework can be accessed through the following attachments:

"Transitioning to a repo-led operating framework"—Bank of England <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/paper/2024/dp/transitioning-to-a-repo-led-operating-framework>

"The importance of central bank reserves"—lecture by Andrew Bailey <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/speech/2024/may/andrew-bailey-lecture-london-school-of-economics-charles-goodhart>

"Let's get ready to repo"—speech by Victoria Saporta <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/speech/2024/july/victoria-saporta-speech-at-afme-seminar>

[HCWS456]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Syria: Sanctions

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): Today I am updating the House on the future of the UK's Syria sanctions regime following the welcome fall of Assad's dictatorship late last year.

Sanctions remain a powerful foreign and security policy tool, and this Government are committed to maximising their impact, which includes reviewing their use in light of changing circumstances.

Therefore, I am pleased to inform the House that the Government will bring forward measures in the coming months adapting the Syria sanctions regime, including amendments to the Syria regulations, which Members of Parliament will have the opportunity to debate.

We are making these changes to support the Syrian people in rebuilding their country and to promote security and stability. They will include the relaxation of restrictions that apply to the energy, transport and finance sectors, and provisions to further support humanitarian delivery.

The Government remain determined to hold Bashar al-Assad and his associates to account for their actions against the people of Syria. We will ensure that asset freezes and travel bans imposed on members of the former regime remain in force.

In this way, the FCDO will continue to use sanctions in a manner that is targeted, proportionate and robust to hold accountable those responsible for atrocious crimes committed during Assad's reign and to support what we hope will be Syria's transition to a more secure, prosperous and stable future.

[HCWS451]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Firearms Licensing Consultation: Government Response

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): The Government are today publishing their response to the public consultation that was run by the previous Government on firearms licensing controls. The consultation ran between 29 June and 23 August 2023. The consultation sought views on recommendations that were made to the Government by the senior coroner in his prevention of future deaths reports following inquests into the deaths of the five people who were shot and killed in Keyham on 12 August 2021; on recommendations made by the Independent Office for Police Conduct following its investigation into the police force involved; and recommendations made by the Scottish Affairs Select Committee following its review of firearms licensing regulations which followed on from a fatal shooting by a licensed shotgun holder on the Isle of Skye on 10 August 2022.

A total of 91,385 responses to the consultation were received either online or by post and email and we are grateful to all those who took the time to respond. The Government response sets out the actions that the Government intend to take to further strengthen firearms licensing controls.

The previous Government decided not to consult on the recommendations that had been made to consider greater alignment of shotgun and firearms controls and legislation. The Government are, however, mindful that the shootings in both Keyham and Skye involved lawfully held shotguns, and that there have been other incidents involving shotguns since these tragic events occurred. We therefore take the view that it is right to look again

at the differences in the controls and to consider whether changes should be made to better protect the public. We intend to publish a new consultation on this issue later this year.

A copy of the Government response will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on gov.uk.

[HCWS450]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Crown Land: Planning Permission for Development

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): Planning is principally a local activity, but it is a well-established principle that in limited circumstances, and where issues of more than local importance are involved, it is appropriate for the Secretary of State to make planning decisions.

Recent experience, including the response to covid-19, has exposed that the existing route for securing planning permission on Crown land, namely the urgent Crown development route under section 293A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 introduced in 2006, is not fit for purpose, and it is telling that it has never once been used.

I am therefore confirming today that the Government will implement two new routes by which Crown bodies can apply for planning permission for development on Crown land in England, as legislated for through the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023.

The first route, referred to as the Crown development route, will allow planning applications for Crown developments which are considered of “national importance” to be submitted to the Planning Inspectorate directly instead of to local planning authorities.

Allowing such planning applications to be determined in this manner will allow for a more timely and proportionate process. Applications taken through this route will still be determined on the basis of their planning merits, with due consideration of local and national planning policy, and local communities and local planning authorities will still be fully engaged throughout the decision-making process and their views taken into account.

This process will be led by an independent planning inspector, with the inspector usually taking the decision, with provision for the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to make the final decision where deemed appropriate.

The second route, an updated urgent Crown development process, will enable applications for “nationally important” development that is needed “urgently” to be determined rapidly under a simplified procedure. Applications under the urgent route will be submitted to, and dealt with directly by, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities, and Local Government.

The Government believe that it is vital to ensure these routes are in place, and it is our sincere hope that it will remain a matter of cross-party consensus that where

circumstances warrant it, decisions on nationally important development by the Crown can and should be made appropriately at the national level.

However, as I argued in opposition during the passage of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act, it is imperative that such powers are used only where necessary, and that appropriate safeguards to their use are put in place. Where they are used, I also want to ensure there is transparency not just with those involved, but with Parliament. In implementing these routes, we have been careful to account for both points, which I will address in turn.

First, these new routes can only be used if the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government considers the proposed development from a Crown body to be of “national importance”. To this end, all applications must be accompanied by a statement setting out why the development is considered to meet that criteria.

The Secretary of State will in general only consider a development to be of national importance if, in her opinion, the development would:

- involve the interests of national security or of foreign Governments;

- contribute towards the provision of national public services or infrastructure, such as new prisons, defence, or border infrastructure;

- support a response to international, national, or regional civil emergencies;

- or otherwise have significant economic, social, or environmental effects and strong public interest at a regional or national level.

For urgent Crown development, the Secretary of State must in addition be satisfied that the development subject to the application is genuinely needed as a matter of urgency. The Secretary of State will only consider this to be the case where the applicant can demonstrate the need for an expedited planning process. The applicant will need to demonstrate that the proposed development will need to be made operational to an accelerated timeframe that is unlikely to be feasible using other application routes, including Crown development, and will need evidence of the likely consequences of not securing a decision within the accelerated timeframe.

Secondly, where these routes are used, the Government are committed to ensuring proper transparency at every stage. This will take the form of three distinct steps:

- First, where an application is accepted by the Secretary of State, the relevant Members of Parliament will be notified at the same time as the applicant and the relevant local planning authorities. A notification will also be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses and will include details as to where the application can be viewed and the process that will follow.

- Secondly, at the point of decision, and again at the same time as the applicant and relevant local planning authorities, the relevant Members of Parliament will be notified of either the grant or refusal of planning permission, and this letter will also be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

- Thirdly, on an annual basis, I will publish a report of all decisions taken under these routes, including a link to the decision letters, which again will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

I am confident that, taken together, these steps will ensure Members are properly appraised of any applications being considered through these routes that relate to

their constituencies, and will provide the House as a whole with the opportunity to consider and scrutinise their general operation. The Government will keep these steps under review as the routes begin to be used.

Finally, with regards to implementation, I have today laid draft regulations which make consequential amendments to the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, and other primary legislation, as well as to planning application fee regulations, to reflect the two new Crown development routes.

These regulations are subject to the affirmative procedure, enabling Parliament to debate them. To support scrutiny ahead of parliamentary debates, I will publish in draft the regulations setting out the procedures for both routes, which will be laid following parliamentary approval of the affirmative regulations. Our aim, subject to parliamentary approval, is to bring both routes into force in April 2025. Further guidance will be published on the operation of the two routes closer to implementation.

[HCWS454]

Large-scale Housing Site Delivery

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): The delivery of significant numbers of large-scale housing developments in England is integral to driving economic growth and meeting the Government's ambitious plan for change milestone of building 1.5 million safe and decent homes in this Parliament.

I am today updating the House on the progress that is being made to build out large sites across the country and to take forward the next generation of new towns.

The next generation of new towns

The post-war new towns programme was the most ambitious town-building effort ever undertaken in the UK. It transformed the lives of millions of working people by giving them affordable and well-designed homes in well-planned and beautiful surroundings. This Government will continue to invest in their regeneration, but we also remain committed to bringing forward the next generation of new towns.

In September 2024, we established an independent New Towns Taskforce and tasked the experts on it with identifying and recommending locations for new towns within 12 months. Over the past five months, the taskforce has made significant progress. Its nationwide call for evidence, which invited proposals for sites with the potential to accommodate large-scale new communities of at least 10,000 homes, attracted over 100 submissions from every region in England, demonstrating the enthusiasm that exists across the country to be part of this transformative programme.

Today, the taskforce is publishing an update on its work, setting out the vision and aims of the programme, as well as the unique benefits it would deliver and the lessons learnt from a comprehensive review of the three phases of the post-war new towns programme.

The Government have been clear that we want exemplary development to be the norm not the exception, so that more communities feel the benefits of new development and welcome it. We remain fully committed to creating high-quality, beautiful, and sustainable buildings and places.

We are therefore determined to ensure that the next generation of new towns are well-connected, well-designed, sustainable and attractive places where people want to live and have all the infrastructure, amenities and services necessary to sustain thriving mixed communities, including public transport and services like GP surgeries and schools.

The taskforce is also today sharing its emerging thinking on how best to meet these expectations, setting out what principles should guide the delivery of the kind of new large-scale communities we want to create through the programme. The intention is to begin a national conversation about what constitutes an ideal new town, and a series of engagement events will be held with the residents of existing new towns to secure their insight.

The Government are clear that public investment, leadership, and focus will be needed to kick-start the delivery of the next generation of new towns. However, our clear long-term objective is to ensure that the settlements brought forward under the programme pay for themselves through the value they create. This requires that the price paid for land reflects the costs of quickly and efficiently providing the infrastructure, amenities and affordable housing essential to the creation of high-quality places. We look forward to receiving the taskforce's recommendations as to how this can be best achieved.

The taskforce will submit its final report to the Deputy Prime Minister and I in the summer, setting out its recommended locations for potential new towns, and its view on how best to fund and deliver them. The Government will then make decisions on the basis of those recommendations and begin the process of initiating the programme.

The spending review will confirm the Government's plans to provide certainty for this transformative programme, demonstrating our commitment to bringing forward sustainable new communities and unlocking economic growth across the country. In the immediate term, an initial £15 million has been allocated for the next financial year, to enable early scoping work on new sites to begin, ensuring delivery can start as soon as ministerial decisions have been made.

New homes accelerator

Following its launch in July 2024, the new homes accelerator has been working with national and local partners to speed up housing delivery on a series of large sites across the country.

These include seven sites that were previously announced, namely Liverpool central docks, Northstowe, Worcestershire Parkway, Langley Sutton Coldfield, Tendring Colchester Borders garden community, Stretton Hall, and Biggleswade garden community, which together have the potential to deliver more than 28,500 homes.

Through intensive engagement with other Departments and statutory consultees as a convener and broker, the accelerator has also helped progress a number of other sites with the capacity to deliver more than 20,000 homes.

The call for evidence that the accelerator launched last year identified 350 sites, with a combined potential delivery pipeline of approximately 700,000 homes, as requiring some form of support to progress.

Today, the accelerator is announcing that it will focus attention on three new sites: Frome Gateway regeneration area in Bristol, south of Cayton in Scarborough, and Beam Park in London. Together, these have the potential to deliver more than 7,400 homes.

The new homes accelerator is also providing £3 million of grant funding to local authorities for site-specific support. This will be supplemented by the ongoing direct advice provided by its dedicated team of built environment specialists. We are also announcing £1 million of funding to key statutory consultees and £2 million of funding to the Building Safety Regulator to accelerate processing of applications.

Regeneration funding

To further increase the supply of new homes, I am today announcing several new investments. These include confirming £29.6 million from the brownfield infrastructure and land fund to unlock 1,000 new homes in Broadford City Village; announcing £1.5 million to support a joint venture between Manchester city council and private partners to deliver a new district in Manchester Victoria North; and £20 million towards remediating small council-owned brownfield sites, as part of the brownfield land release fund.

[HCWS452]

PRIME MINISTER

Machinery of Government

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): I am making this statement to bring to the House's attention the following machinery of government change.

On 4 September 2024 I announced that the Government would respond in full to the Grenfell phase 2 inquiry report within six months. In response to one of the report's recommendations, I am confirming today that responsibility for fire will move from the Home Office to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. This change will bring responsibility for building safety and fire under a single Secretary of State, providing for a more coherent approach to keeping people safe from fire in their homes. The Home Office will retain management of the airwave service contract on behalf of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and will remain responsible for the emergency services mobile communications programme and His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services.

This change will be effective from 1 April 2025. The Government will respond to the full report in due course.

[HCWS455]

Written Corrections

Thursday 13 February 2025

Ministerial Corrections

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Film Industry

The following are extracts from the debate on the film industry on 9 October 2024.

Lisa Nandy: This Government will go further still to support this critical industry. The skills shortage that has been ignored for too long acts as a break on the ambitions of this incredible sector. That is why this Government launched Skills England to bring about the skills we need for a decade of national renewal of our communities, business and country. We will focus apprenticeships once more on young people to set them up to succeed and to help fill the 25,000 vacancies in the creative sector.

[*Official Report*, 9 October 2024; Vol. 754, c. 316.]

Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, the right hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy):

Lisa Nandy: This Government will go further still to support this critical industry. The skills shortage that has been ignored for too long acts as a break on the ambitions of this incredible sector. That is why this Government launched Skills England to bring about the skills we need for a decade of national renewal of

our communities, business and country. We will focus apprenticeships once more on young people to set them up to succeed and to help fill the **49,000** vacancies in the creative **industries**.

Lisa Nandy: I have a great deal of respect for the hon. Lady, and I am grateful to her not just for her welcome today and her warm words but for the support that she and others on the Opposition Benches have given me and the team to take up the mantle. But if I had left a sector with 25,000 vacancies that it could not fill, a legacy of creativity being erased from our communities and our classrooms and, most of all, a £22 billion economic black hole that working-class people are paying the price for up and down the country—all of that—and then had such a resounding rejection from the electorate only a few months ago, I would be speaking with a little bit more humility from the Dispatch Box.

[*Official Report*, 9 October 2024; Vol. 754, c. 319.]

Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport:

Lisa Nandy: I have a great deal of respect for the hon. Lady, and I am grateful to her not just for her welcome today and her warm words but for the support that she and others on the Opposition Benches have given me and the team to take up the mantle. But if I had left **the creative industries** with **49,000** vacancies that **they** could not fill, a legacy of creativity being erased from our communities and our classrooms and, most of all, a £22 billion economic black hole that working-class people are paying the price for up and down the country—all of that—and then had such a resounding rejection from the electorate only a few months ago, I would be speaking with a little bit more humility from the Dispatch Box.

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