

**Thursday
5 March 2026**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 5 March 2026

The following abbreviations are used to show a Member's party affiliation:

Abbreviation	Affiliation
Alliance	Alliance Party of Northern Ireland
Con	Conservative Party
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
Green	Green Party of England and Wales
Ind	Independent*
Lab	Labour Party
Lab/Co-op	Labour and Co-operative Party
LD	Liberal Democrat
PC	Plaid Cymru
Reform	Reform UK
SDLP	Social Democratic and Labour Party
SNP	Scottish National Party
TUV	Traditional Unionist Voice
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party

*The term “Independent” may denote—

Members who have been elected as Independent candidates without affiliation to a political party; or

Members who have been elected after standing for a political party but no longer have the party Whip in the House of Commons.

House of Commons

Thursday 5 March 2026

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Official History Programme

1. **Laurence Turner** (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): If he will commission new works under the Official History Programme. [908092]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): I should start by referring to my entries in the Members' Register of Financial Interests about my books and to my background as a historian. I thank my hon. Friend for such an excellent opening question. He will be pleased to hear that the Government are to consider the resumption of the Official History Programme, which I know is of particular interest to him. Indeed, work is continuing on two previously commissioned studies: one on the history of the Joint Intelligence Committee and one on the history of the UK's nuclear deterrent.

Laurence Turner: I draw the House's attention to my vice-chairship of the all-party parliamentary group for archives and history. I strongly welcome the statement that my right hon. Friend has just made to the House. For more than 100 years, the Official History Programme provided valuable insight on matters such as war, peace and social policy. The Pilling review concluded that it should continue, so it is a welcome update that new works will be commissioned. Will the House be further updated on progress on the commissioning of those new works?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Yes, absolutely. Historical perspective improves the work of Government—100%. The programme began in 1908. It was concentrated then on naval and military matters. It was expanded by Harold Wilson in 1966 to look at peacetime matters as well. I certainly will update the House on the commissioning of new works.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): When we go to get tickets on a Wednesday for PMQs, we see the story of the suffragette movement on the walls. What assessment has the Minister made of the importance of teaching the women's suffrage movement as a compulsory

component of the Official History Programme, particularly given its role in advancing democratic participation and strengthening pupils' understanding of civic rights and responsibilities, such as voting?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman on the importance of teaching the campaign for women's suffrage. I should also update him, seeing as he has asked the question, that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is overseeing a significant history project akin to the Official History Programme covering the period of the troubles.

Civil Service Pension Scheme

2. **Gareth Bacon** (Orpington) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the delivery of the civil service pension scheme. [908093]

5. **Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Capita on ensuring timely payments under the civil service pension scheme. [908096]

Mr Speaker: Welcome back, Minister.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Satvir Kaur): The issues and delays facing a number of civil servants and pension scheme members in accessing their pensions after a lifetime of service is completely unacceptable. The Government are overseeing a robust recovery plan for the service and are ensuring that support is available to help those impacted. My right hon. Friend the Paymaster General has met the chief executive of Capita to set out what the Government expect, and we will do all we can to hold Capita to account to deliver the high standards that people deserve.

Gareth Bacon: I thank the Minister for her answer because, like many hon. Members on both sides of the House, I have been getting correspondence from former civil servants whose payments have been excessively delayed since Capita took over. I note what the Minister says about the Secretary of State meeting the chief executive of Capita, but would she commit to a full review of the service that Capita has provided so far? Will she also commit to making either a verbal or a written statement to the House about the actions being taken to make this service work better?

Satvir Kaur: The priority right now is to ensure that the robust recovery plan is completed and that we get a normal service as quickly as possible. Of course, we will continue to update the House.

Catherine Fookes: I welcome my hon. Friend to her place. My constituents Richard, Peter and Chris all planned to retire in January and all gave at least the required notice to get their pensions; I have many other cases of people waiting too. January has been and gone, as has February, and despite repeated attempts to get their pensions and hours in phone queues, these poor people have not seen a penny. Will the Minister please update me on when she expects a return to proper service levels, and whether she will look at MyCSP and Capita providing compensation to those who face such serious financial hardship?

Satvir Kaur: I am sorry to hear about the stress caused to Richard, Peter and Chris—that is completely unacceptable. There is a timetable in our recovery plan. I encourage my hon. Friend to write to me so that the team can look into that case.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): A constituent approached me in January having applied for his pension over six months earlier, with no resolution. He has been forced to draw on his personal savings simply to get by. Will the Government introduce a redress scheme for pensioners who were forced to deplete their savings or even take out commercial loans?

Satvir Kaur: Hardship loans are available, and a statutory complaints procedure is in place to determine whether compensation is appropriate. I urge hon. Members to direct their constituents towards it.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): Our manifesto promised the biggest wave of insourcing for a generation. Will the Minister explain when that will happen? Capita will not fix the pension issues faced by thousands until June this year, according to the permanent secretary. To add insult to injury, Capita has been awarded the civil service payroll contract for a quarter of a million workers, covering many large Departments. When will the Government stop rewarding failure by issuing contracts to these outsourcing companies?

Satvir Kaur: I understand my hon. Friend's frustration. She will know that the contract was awarded under the previous Government in 2023. I reassure her that existing key performance indicators have been enhanced and strengthened to deliver tighter performance expectations, with higher penalties for severe failures. Those have already been applied to recent issues and delays in Capita's administration of the civil service pension scheme.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): The privatisation of the delivery of the civil service pension scheme has been nothing short of catastrophic. The Government were well warned that Capita was ill-prepared for a job of that size, but they pressed ahead regardless. Although Capita must shoulder much of the blame, the Cabinet Office has serious questions to answer about its responsibility for this fiasco. Will the Minister start by apologising to those in my constituency who, after a lifetime of service, have been left facing penury because of the Government's part in the hopeless mismanagement of this transfer?

Satvir Kaur: As I have said, the contract was awarded under the previous Government. We have the right to hold Capita to account, which we are doing. I am sorry to hear of the difficulties and distress that the hon. Gentleman's constituents are facing. I encourage him and all Members to contact me and my team about such matters so that we can look into and resolve them as quickly as possible.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): My constituent Stephen retired almost a year ago after a long career in public service, yet he is still unable to access his pension. I appreciate that a recovery scheme is under way, but will Ministers meet me to discuss his case, because it is completely unacceptable?

Satvir Kaur: I will of course meet my hon. Friend to discuss Stephen's case and resolve it as quickly as possible.

EU: Mutual Interests

3. **Dr Jeevun Sandher** (Loughborough) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with EU counterparts on topics of mutual interest. [908094]

14. **Mr Luke Charters** (York Outer) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with EU counterparts on topics of mutual interest. [908107]

20. **Steve Race** (Exeter) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with EU counterparts on topics of mutual interest [908115]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): Since leaving the European Union, it has never been more important to work alongside the EU in the global context that we face. It is in our country's interest to have a stronger trading and security relationship. Our new strategic partnership with the EU is good for bills, good for jobs and good for borders. We continue our negotiations ahead of the next summit.

Dr Sandher: Reform Members promised us that torching our relationship with Europe would make us richer and stronger. They were wrong on both counts. Higher import barriers have driven up costs by £200, and a continent with wider divisions makes us weaker. How the Government will show the courage needed to build our relationship with Europe, make us stronger and make life here more affordable?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: We are building a stronger relationship every week to improve our economic operation and drive growth in this country. The EU is our biggest market, and the deals that we are negotiating on emissions, energy trading and food and agriculture trade will reduce costs for businesses and offer better prices and more choice to consumers.

Mr Charters: As my constituents head off to beaches in Benidorm, open-top buses in Barça and city breaks in Copenhagen over Easter, they will be sending holiday snaps and making calls home to their families. Will the Minister update the House on what discussions he has had with his European counterparts on cutting roaming charges for UK travellers, which came back to bite Brits thanks to the Tories' botched Brexit?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Those trips sound wonderful, and my hon. Friend is right to raise the issue, which impacts many families travelling to Europe. The Government work to strengthen the UK's relationship with the EU on a number of fronts, and I will ensure that that issue is considered as well.

Steve Race: I welcome the Government's changed approach to our vital relationship with the EU. As a member of the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, I know how much it has been welcomed by our partners in Europe, as well as by my residents in Exeter. Ahead of the next session of the PPA later in

March, will the Minister set out the agenda for deepening co-operation and trust beyond the agenda agreed at last May's EU-UK summit?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: At this year's summit, the EU and the UK agreed commitments over a wide range of areas, from trade and youth opportunities to security and defence co-operation. We are making good progress on all those areas, but as my hon. Friend says, there is now a forward programme. This Government will not be restricted by ideology. We take a ruthlessly pragmatic approach across different sectors to what is in our national economic interest.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): After at least 15 major U-turns, it is helpful to check which promises the Government still intend to keep. On 22 July 2024, when I asked the Prime Minister whether he could promise that he would not accept the automatic application of EU rules unless they had been specifically approved by this Parliament, he answered simply, "Yes." Can the Minister say that it is still the Government's position that we will not be required to adopt new European Union legislation?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Of course there will still be a role for Parliament in the mechanism, as set out in last May's common understanding. The Conservatives have to own the choice they are making here. Through our food and drink agreement, we will take away costs from businesses, take away red tape and have a downward pressure on food prices. The Conservatives will want at the next election to put that red tape back and put those costs up. That is their choice, and I welcome the debate with them.

Mike Wood: The Minister knows very well that the choice was that of the biggest democratic exercise in UK history. His party promised to respect the result of that referendum but is instead seeking to row back on it. Members of the House and the wider public will have heard that the Minister clearly did not rule out the UK having to adopt new European Union legislation. The Minister will know from his time as shadow International Trade Secretary that we would never accept a trade agreement where the arbiter is an institution on one side, so can he at least rule out having the European Court of Justice as a body adjudicating in any disputes that follow from his reset?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The shadow Minister has not read the common understanding and the mechanism that is set out. There is an independent arbitration panel, with the role of the European Court of Justice restricted to the interpretation of EU law but not binding on the overall decision of the panel. He ought to read the detail in the agreement. We were talking about history earlier. My best piece of advice to him is to do his research before he asks his questions.

Standards in Government

4. **Chris Hinchliff** (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): What steps he is taking to uphold standards in Government.
[908095]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Darren Jones): Since coming into office, this Government have established the Ethics and Integrity Commission to strengthen standards across the public sector. The Prime Minister has strengthened the independent adviser's ability to open investigations into ministerial misconduct, and with the Public Office (Accountability) Bill, we are introducing new duties of candour for public officials, with criminal and disciplinary consequences for those who fall short.

Chris Hinchliff: Over the last 25 years, companies that have donated tens of millions of pounds to political parties have been granted Government contracts worth more than £60 billion. It is pretty obvious to the public that these cosy, influential and lucrative relationships appear to be the precise opposite of high standards in public life. Does the Minister agree that companies donating to political parties should be automatically disqualified from Government contracts?

Darren Jones: I can assure my hon. Friend and the House that under this Government, political donations have no bearing on the award of Government contracts whatsoever. Public procurement rules require contracts to be awarded fairly and transparently, and they are rigorously scrutinised to deliver the best value for the taxpayer. Under the Procurement Act 2023, the Government have strengthened measures to be able to take action against companies when there is any evidence of wrongdoing.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): Why did the hon. Member for Makerfield (Josh Simons) resign as a Cabinet Office Minister at the weekend?

Darren Jones: I refer the hon. Gentleman to his statement.

Mr Speaker: I call the Opposition spokesperson.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): On his visit to Washington in February last year, the Prime Minister and Peter Mandelson had an undisclosed meeting with US data company Palantir. Palantir at the time was a client of Global Counsel, the company in which Peter Mandelson retained a commanding share. Later that year, Palantir received a direct award for £240 million from this Government. Given the apparent conflict of interests, will the Minister agree to publish full details of that meeting in February last year, and explain why it was not disclosed at the time?

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Member for raising that particular contract, and since he last asked the Government that question we have done some research. The original contract was awarded by a Mr A. Burghart, under the previous Administration, with a direct ministerial award for the contract that was then renewed at the subsequent awarding that he refers to. He asked me for the disclosure of information, and that will of course be done under the Humble Address.

Alex Burghart: I never had an undisclosed meeting with Palantir, with a person—[*Interruption.*] I never had an undisclosed meeting with Palantir, with a man who was advising that company. This is something entirely different, as the Chief Secretary to the Prime

Minister knows full well. There was an undisclosed meeting between the Prime Minister and that company in February last year. That should not have happened. This looks, to all intents and purposes, like a conflict of interests. Will the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister agree to publish that information? He says it is within the scope of the Humble Address, but the Humble Address was about the appointment of Lord Mandelson. This is not about the appointment of Lord Mandelson; this is about a meeting that the Prime Minister and Mandelson had in February 2025. Will the Minister please publish the details of that meeting, and ensure that the new Cabinet Secretary looks into what happened at that meeting, and everything between that meeting and the direct award?

Darren Jones: The Humble Address deals with the matters in question, but I remind the hon. Member that he is asking about the extension of a contract that was awarded under the previous Government. To suggest that it was a new contract that had been in any way related to the meeting is incorrect.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): The creation of the Government post of special representative for trade and investment, and the appointment of Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor to that post, raises deeply alarming questions about how previous Governments treated powerful men who abuse their positions. Liberal Democrat Members are proud to have secured the release of all relevant files around that appointment. The Government have told us repeatedly that they support such transparency, so will the Minister set out what deadline has been set for the files to be assembled in accordance with the Humble Address, in order that they be released as soon as police investigations allow, and will he confirm the number of civil servants the Government have allocated to that task?

Darren Jones: The Humble Address that was put before the House by the Liberal Democrats is being managed by the Department for Business and Trade, as the appointing Department for the previous role of the special representative for trade and investment. The Cabinet Office and the Cabinet Secretary will be working with the Department to bring forward those documents as soon as possible. I am afraid I do not have to hand the number of officials who are working specifically on Humble Addresses, but it is a significantly higher number than it was a few weeks ago.

Lisa Smart: Government Ministers, including the Prime Minister, have repeatedly told the House that Lord Mandelson should lose his peerage, yet weeks on, no concrete steps forward can be seen. No legislation has been brought forward, and even in the face of the appalling allegations, Mandelson appears safe from being thrown out for a breach of the Lords code of conduct. Does the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister recognise how preposterous it is that that unelected figure has still not been removed, and how impotent it makes the Government look? Does he recognise that what we need is not just to throw out one disgraced peer, or to tinker by abolishing hereditary peers, but root and branch reform of our entire second Chamber, including finally making it democratic?

Darren Jones: The hon. Member is right that we need to bring forward rules that allow provisions to apply to all and any peers who need to be removed from the other place for particular reasons. That is why the Government have not brought forward a specific piece of legislation in respect of Lord Mandelson, but are in the process of constructing a Bill that will be able to deal with these cases in the round, and I look forward to bringing that Bill to the House shortly.

Devolved Administrations

6. Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on strengthening the relationship between the UK Government and the devolved Administrations. [908097]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Darren Jones): This Labour Government are focused on delivering for every part of the country. Over the past few weeks, we have signed a £50 million defence growth deal with the Welsh Government and announced plans to build seven new Welsh railway stations through £14 billion of investment. We have halved tariffs on Scottish whisky following the Prime Minister's successful visit to China. We have progressed our child poverty strategy by voting for legislation to remove the two-child cap, which will benefit over 17,000 children in Northern Ireland alone. In my role as Minister for Intergovernmental Relations, I regularly convene interministerial standing committees with representatives from the devolved Governments, and we have most recently discussed election security and preparedness for the May elections.

Tonia Antoniazzi: My constituents in Gower need both Governments focused on what matters to them: the cost of living, jobs and public services. Does the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster agree that, with Labour Governments in Westminster and Cardiff, that is exactly what we are getting? Does he also agree that neither the distraction and ideological fantasies of the Greens nor the division and destruction of Reform will help Wales to move forward into a new era?

Darren Jones: The distraction of the Reform party or the Green party is not one that we have the benefit of this morning, because none of the Members from those parties have come to the Chamber to take part in questions. My hon. Friend is right that two Labour Governments working together delivers real change for people in Wales. After 14 years of a Conservative Government who ignored the Welsh Government in Wales, we have delivered on rail, AI growth zones, defence and jobs, and the highest level of spending since devolution began to get NHS waiting lists down. We will continue to do that, working together with First Minister Eluned Morgan and her team in Cardiff.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Does the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster share my profound disappointment that once again the Scottish National party is seeking to frame the Scottish elections as being about a divisive independence referendum, rather than about devolved powers, on which its record is so woeful?

Darren Jones: I agree. When I visit Scotland to talk to voters ahead of the May elections, they talk to me about the quality of their public services—about how the NHS in Scotland is performing woefully compared with England, and about how the Scottish National party in government in Scotland will block investment into jobs in nuclear energy and the defence industries. That is why a Labour Government in Scotland, under Anas Sarwar, the next Labour First Minister in Scotland, will show the power of two Labour Governments working together to deliver for the people of Scotland, exactly as I have just described happening in Wales.

Co-operative Sector

7. **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): What steps he is taking through the Office for the Impact Economy to help increase the size of the co-operative sector. [908098]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Satvir Kaur): This Government recognise the enormous value of our co-operative sector. That is why the Office for the Impact Economy is already working closely with other Departments, including the Department for Business and Trade and the Treasury, to grow the co-operative sector and maximise its social and economic impact, helping to deliver the promise of national renewal the country voted for at the last election. I personally look forward to working with my hon. Friend, in his role as chair of the social, co-operative, and community economy all-party parliamentary group, and with the wider sector to build on this.

Patrick Hurley: Given the Government's commitment to growing the co-operative sector, will the Minister commit to working across Government, specifically with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, so that high street rental auctions actively prioritise community-owned and co-operative models, and ensure that the Office for the Impact Economy is promoting these economies appropriately?

Satvir Kaur: This Government are committed to delivering pride in places where we live. High street rental auctions are a really effective new tool for local authorities to do that, by bringing vacant high street units back into use, while unlocking opportunities for community organisations to access tenancies at reduced rates. Early adopter councils are making great strides in implementing these new powers and sharing best practice. The Office for the Impact Economy and I are working closely with MHCLG and other Departments to maximise the impact of place-based social and economic delivery.

Civil Service Visa Sponsorship

8. **Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): What guidance his Department issues on civil service sponsorship of visas. [908099]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Satvir Kaur): This Government are committed to preserving the civil service's proud and long-standing commitment to merit-based appointments, ensuring we have the skills and talent in place to deliver on our priorities. Those seeking to work in our civil service must abide by existing nationality rules, and each Department must ensure compliance with UK visa sponsorship rules, which are issued through the Home Office.

Blake Stephenson: Hundreds of public sector bodies, including a number of Departments and arm's length bodies, are registered to sponsored visas, as the Minister will know. Does she agree that the public sector should lead from the front and sponsor visas by exception only in the cases of hiring truly world-class talent? Can she confirm whether all Departments and arm's length bodies are complying with the guidance issued by the Cabinet Office?

Satvir Kaur: We want to champion world-class talent, and we want to have and retain the best talent. That is why we have announced the national school of government to ensure that we can do that. I politely remind the hon. Member that numbers actually increased after the points-based system was introduced. That is what made the biggest difference.

Government Shared Services

9. **Lorraine Beavers** (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the procurement of the business process services element of the Synergy programme in the context of shared services across Government. [908101]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): The Cabinet Office provided support to the Department for Work and Pensions on this matter, including by sharing the lessons learned from the recent transition of the civil service pension scheme, which hon. Members were discussing a moment or two ago.

Lorraine Beavers: Last week, I heard that the Government have made Capita the preferred bidder for a £700 million contract for shared services across Departments. Are they having a laugh? Given Capita's appalling performance in administering the civil service pension scheme, which has affected hundreds of my constituents, will the Minister urgently review the procurement process for this contract? Will he commit to bringing this work back in-house to ensure that Capita does not mess this contract up as well?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has sought and received specific assurances from Capita regarding the Synergy contract. Members across the House should be in no doubt about this Government's desire to hold Capita robustly to account for its responsibilities under its contracts.

Digital ID Scheme: Public consultation

10. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester Withington) (Lab): What steps he plans to take to consult the public on the design of the digital ID scheme. [908102]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr James Frith): Public services should be there for us when we need them, but right now it is too hard for people to get what they need. The new, free-to-access digital ID intends to change that by supporting the personalising of public services, making everyday life easier for everyone.

The consultation will be launched next week to ensure that the public can have their say on how we make digital ID work for them.

Jeff Smith: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his well-deserved elevation to ministerial office.

Even though digital ID will make it easier for people to access public services and engage with public bodies, there is still an awful lot of disinformation, and frankly conspiracy theories, out there trying to undermine the case for it. Do the Government have any specific plans to try to counter those narratives as part of the consultation?

Mr Frith: I thank my hon. Friend for his well wishes; I am grateful for the opportunity to help to dispel any misinformation on this exciting programme of digital transformation of our public services. Let me be clear: this will not be compulsory, and there is no central pot of data. In my early conversations, I have already been assured of the security of data by design and the intentions of this plan to make digital ID not compulsory, but something that people deem for themselves to be a “must have”. It is for us to rise to this challenge in our design and delivery of it. More broadly, we want to have a national conversation. The upcoming consultation will clearly set out the Government’s position on this programme.

Civil Service Pensions Recovery Plan

11. **Susan Murray** (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): What estimate he has made of the cost of the civil service pensions recovery plan. [908103]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): On the recovery plan, the Government have ensured that hardship loans are in place. The Government are monitoring Capita and holding it to account on the recovery plan. The priority is to stabilise the service; there will then be a commercial discussion on cost.

Susan Murray: On 23 February, the Cabinet Office confirmed that hardship loans would not be available to dependants or surviving spouses of civil service pension scheme members. That left one of my constituents alone, with two children and just one income after sadly losing their partner. Can the Minister explain how much it would have cost to provide support to dependants? Can he tell me how many people have been left without support as a result of this decision?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I would be grateful if the hon. Member wrote to me about that worrying case; I am more than happy to look in to it. The objective is, first, to try to ensure that people are not left without support, but I should also tell the House that the Cabinet Office has already withheld moneys from Capita for not meeting milestones, and our contractual rights are reserved in respect of Capita and the previous provider, MyCSP.

Personal Protective Equipment Contracts

12. **Kirsteen Sullivan** (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): What steps his Department is taking to encourage the adoption of the inclusive personal protective equipment standard BS 30417 in Government procurement contracts. [908104]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Ward): The Government strongly support inclusive PPE for all workers and welcome the new British Standards Institution standard. Central Government commercial teams have seen increased provision of inclusive PPE across major programmes and projects. I know how seriously my hon. Friend takes this issue; so do the Government, and I hope to meet with her soon to discuss it further.

Kirsteen Sullivan: With the Government on a mission to build 1.5 million new homes and invest billions in upgrading critical infrastructure, fit-to-form PPE is more important than ever for the expanding workforce. The Government have an opportunity to embrace BS 30417 and use the state’s substantial purchasing power to increase employee safety through inclusive PPE for all. Will the Government commit to becoming an early adopter of the standard and lead industry by example?

Chris Ward: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: fit-to-form PPE is vital to protect all workers, and I agree that there is an opportunity for Government to do more here. We welcome the new standard and think it will contribute to good practice, and we will monitor how that proceeds. I understand that the BSI will present on this to the construction sector soon. My hon. Friend and I are due to meet shortly, and I look forward to discussing how we can take this forward.

Cyber-threats

13. **Martin Rhodes** (Glasgow North) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle cyber-threats. [908106]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Dan Jarvis): We are working with our allies to counter cyber-threats, most recently using sanctions against Chinese tech companies and Russian cyber criminals. The National Crime Agency has arrested and charged those responsible for the reckless cyber-attack on Transport for London. Our new “lock the door” campaign provides practical ways for organisations to protect themselves from online threats. In the spring, the great city of Glasgow will host CYBERUK, where the Government will launch the national cyber action plan.

Martin Rhodes: I recently chaired a roundtable, which produced a report from Fortinet, a cyber-security firm based in my constituency. The report highlights the opportunities and risks of cyber-resilience as we transition to Great British Railways. Does the Minister agree that more public procurement has a crucial role to play in ensuring that our railways are secure by design and that the Government must keep pace with the evolving cyber-threat to our critical national infrastructure?

Dan Jarvis: I completely agree with my hon. Friend: public procurement is an important tool that ensures the UK’s cyber-security. On Great British Railways, the Department for Transport works with partners across Government and the rail sector to improve the understanding of cyber-risk, and I would be pleased to pass a copy of the report he mentioned to the relevant Minister to ensure that it can be considered as part of that work.

Health and Social Care: IT Systems

15. **Sonia Kumar** (Dudley) (Lab): Whether his Department has issued guidance to the Department of Health and Social Care on the procurement of secure IT systems infrastructure from British businesses. [908108]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Ward): The Government are determined to ensure that our £400 billion-a-year procurement budget supports British businesses. The Cabinet Office has published the digital, data and technology playbook, which provides guidance on how to source and contract digital data and technology projects. It includes guidance for all Departments, including the Department of Health and Social Care.

Sonia Kumar: We have seen the devastating impact of cyber-attacks on British companies and the NHS, and there are serious concerns about the NHS data being entrusted to external firms such as Palantir. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that new NHS IT systems are secure, ethically governed, protect patient data and public trust, and are British where possible?

Chris Ward: My hon. Friend raises a serious point, which builds on the last question, which the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, who is also the Security Minister, answered, and the question about digital ID. If it is okay with my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar), I will write to her about the steps that the Department is taking and how we are working across Government on this important matter.

UK-EU Emission Trading Systems

16. **Tom Hayes** (Bournemouth East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has with the European Commission on linking UK and EU emission trading systems. [908109]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Ward): As part of our new partnership with the EU, we are currently negotiating an agreement to link emission trading schemes. This will lower costs for businesses and consumers, and, alongside the food and drink deal mentioned previously, add £9 billion a year to our economy. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office speaks regularly with Commissioner Šefčovič on this, and we will keep the House updated on progress.

Tom Hayes: The EU's carbon budget amendment mechanism came into being on 1 January. It affects the IFA2 interconnector between Britain and France, which I visited recently. CBAM is a trade block for UK electricity exports to the EU, imposing costs on exporters of £2.2 billion, and it robs the Treasury of up to £8 billion at a time when we need that money to invest in our public services and to have a stronger buffer against external shocks. Does the Minister agree that we should not be shooting ourselves in the foot and throwing away money, as the Conservatives would do, and that we should instead be boosting trade, boosting energy security, boosting our national security and seeking an exemption from CBAM?

Chris Ward: Absolutely; I could not agree more. At the heart of the negotiation on which my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office is leading is how we reduce bills, ease the route to decarbonisation and reduce our reliance on volatile fossil fuel markets, which, as we have seen in the last week, is not just a national security issue but a cost of living issue. That is why we are working so hard on it, and why such work is broadly welcomed by so many businesses.

Civil Service Reform

17. **Luke Murphy** (Basingstoke) (Lab): What steps he is taking through civil service reform to support the economy. [908110]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Satvir Kaur): The Government are committed to delivering a strong, stable and growing economy for every region in our country. That includes bringing high-quality civil service roles to towns and cities across the country, which will not only bring over £880 million in local economic benefits but ensure that the civil service better reflects the communities we serve.

Luke Murphy: I thank the Minister for her answer; it is fantastic to see her on the Front Bench for what I think are her first parliamentary questions. Two of the things my constituents care most about are increasing their living standards and improving their public services, and both depend on economic growth. How will the reforms to the civil service set out by the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister earlier this year, including on the national school of government, help drive economic growth and meet my constituents' priorities?

Satvir Kaur: As a fellow Hampshire MP, I am pleased that my hon. Friend continues to champion our wonderful region's cause. The Government are already working to improve living standards for individuals and families in his constituency and across the UK. The civil service plays a crucial role in ensuring that we continue to deliver on this issue. The national school of government will ensure that we nurture talent, give opportunities to more communities outside London, and have the people with the best skills to deliver on our priorities.

Cyber-security

18. **Sarah Russell** (Congleton) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help improve the cyber-security of national infrastructure. [908111]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Dan Jarvis): In November, the Government introduced the Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill to protect essential digital services from cyber-attacks and to enable the Government to better respond to new cyber-threats. In the spring, we will publish the national cyber action plan, which will strengthen our resilience, tackle the threats and maximise the opportunities for growth in the cyber sector.

Sarah Russell: I thank the Minister for his answer. We have seen in recent days that Iran is bombing data centres across the middle east, and we are well aware that there have been problems with cyber-attacks by

non-state and state-backed actors from Iran. Can the Minister please outline what the Government and the National Cyber Security Centre are doing to deal with the increased threat?

Dan Jarvis: Let me assure my hon. Friend that the Government are absolutely committed to strengthening the UK's resilience. We have invested in the Government Cyber Co-ordination Centre, a leading cross-Government service that is actively monitoring vulnerabilities and enabling a more effective response to threats. The National Cyber Security Centre is closely monitoring the situation in the middle east, and directly engaging with relevant sectors by providing immediate sector-specific information and advice.

Peter Mandelson: Release of Information

19. **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): What recent progress he has made on implementing the humble Address of 4 February 2026. [908114]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Darren Jones): As I have outlined previously, work is ongoing across Departments to identify the material relevant to the Humble Address. Throughout this process, the Government have recognised the urgency and seriousness of fully complying with that Humble Address, and that is why we will publish relevant materials in tranches, the first of which we have committed to publishing in early March.

Gregory Stafford: Can the Minister confirm whether the head of the Government's propriety and ethics team was appointed without an external recruitment process or written ministerial sign-off, in an apparent breach of its own rules? If so, is this further proof of a lack of transparency and accountability, and of a failure to uphold the propriety and ethics at the heart of this Government?

Darren Jones: No, and no.

Foreign State Actors: Disinformation

21. **Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in levels of disinformation by foreign state actors. [908116]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Dan Jarvis): Disinformation by hostile state actors, particularly from Russia, is an immediate and evolving threat characterised by divisive information operations and the manipulation of public discourse. In response, the Government have sanctioned 38 organisations for information warfare since 2024, enforced the Online Safety Act 2023, and built media literacy skills for young people, so that they can engage with information critically. Most recently, the UK sanctioned three foreign information and manipulation targets responsible for destabilising Ukraine and seeking to undermine European democracy.

Peter Swallow: Last week, a representative of Meta appeared before the Joint Committee on Human Rights, and when I pressed him on its role in safeguarding democracy, he was unable to say whether it is doing enough to prevent foreign actors from using social

media to undermine our democratic rights and freedoms. This week, we have had the Second Reading of the Representation of the People Bill, which seeks to strengthen our democracy. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to use this opportunity to get together with social media companies—or rather, to get tougher with them; I only wish we could get together with them—that are not doing enough about foreign interference on their platforms?

Dan Jarvis: I agree with my hon. Friend that social media platforms have a very important role to play in safeguarding our democracy. The foreign interference offence is a priority offence under the Online Safety Act 2023, which places duties on social media platforms to tackle illegal content. It requires platforms to take proactive action to identify and minimise users' exposure to state-linked interference. However, we will not hesitate to go further to protect our citizens and our democracy from this threat.

Topical Questions

T1. [908117] **Mr Bayo Alaba** (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Darren Jones): May I take this opportunity to welcome the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Test (Satvir Kaur), back from maternity leave? I congratulate the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Frith), on his Dispatch Box debut, and welcome Baroness Anderson in the other place, who has joined the Cabinet Office team today.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North has said, next week, we will launch a national conversation to ensure that the public have their say on how digital identification can be used to make modern public services. Digital ID will be free to access and secure, and will make it easier for people to prove who they are when logging into the gov.uk app. Over time, government by app will become a reality, much like banking or shopping by app. There will be quicker, easier and more secure access to public services at the touch of a button, which will ensure that our public services are there for people when they need them.

Mr Alaba: I thank the Minister for that response. Small businesses are the backbone of our local economies, but in my constituency, sunny Southend East and Rochford, they are held back by traffic congestion on the A127. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that local infrastructure projects, such as a new link road for south-east Essex, receive cross-party prioritisation, and can drive productivity and growth for small and medium-sized enterprises?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Ward): My hon. Friend refers to the A127, and I could mention that the A259 in sunny Brighton has the same hold-ups, but we will not dwell on that. He is right that we need to do more to support SME growth and productivity, and to free up opportunity across the country. We have recently changed procurement rules to make sure that more money—and more power as well—is

kept in local communities. We will publish further plans soon. I hope that Transport Ministers have heard his point about a new link road.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Yesterday, in the light of the new China spy case, I asked the Security Minister to place China on the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme. He told us that FIRS is “a relatively new tool”, and that the Government “are seeking to ensure that we can derive the maximum operational capability from it.”—[*Official Report*, 4 March 2026; Vol. 781, c. 817.]

That is wonderful Whitehall language, but will he please tell us what it means?

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Dan Jarvis): The arguments about FIRS are well rehearsed, but I am old enough to remember when Conservative Members said that we would not introduce FIRS. Then they said that we would introduce it later than we had said we would. We introduced FIRS on time, but it is still a relatively new capability. I think that it offers considerable potential, in terms of what it will deliver for our country, but we are looking very closely at how we can ensure its maximum operational capability. I think that is pretty clear in any language.

Alex Burghart: Well, it is not very clear, because FIRS is three years old. This morning, I spoke to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat), who established FIRS. When he was establishing it, MI5 told him that it was essential for understanding the operation of the Chinese state in the UK. The enhanced tier would impose mandatory registration and transparency requirements on individuals and organisations in the UK working with Chinese entities. I think most people in this House would now agree that that is entirely necessary. It is there to help our security services protect our country. Please will the Security Minister give us a date by which he will come back to this House to tell us definitively whether he will put China on the enhanced tier, and to set out his explanation?

Dan Jarvis: On a simple point of fact, FIRS is not three years old. When we came into government, FIRS was not a properly developed system. [*Interruption.*] Opposition Members may groan, but it is a statement of truth that FIRS was not ready to go. This Government got a grip and introduced that tool. It came into force, in effect, on 1 October last year. We have already placed two countries on the enhanced tier. We take these decisions very carefully, but I give the hon. Gentleman a commitment that I will come back, when there is a requirement to do so, and update the House on any further decisions that we seek to make on FIRS.

T4. [908120] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester Withington) (Lab): The Government deal with a huge number of arm's length public bodies of variable value and success. What progress are Ministers making on tackling the number and effectiveness of arm's length public bodies?

The Minister without Portfolio (Anna Turley): I thank my hon. Friend for that really important question. We have undertaken an arm's length body review, and it is

making serious progress. We have already seen NHS England removed, to make sure that we bring our important services under democratic control. We are also looking to make a huge amount of savings in this area. I look forward to updating my hon. Friend and the House on progress shortly.

T2. [908118] **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Thousands of former public sector workers are facing delays to their pension payments. Both MyCSP and Capita have catastrophically failed as the administrators of these pension funds, but the real failure is the Cabinet Office's inability to negotiate contracts that include financial sanctions, in order to drive up performance. What will the Minister do to sort this out?

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): Both contracts that the hon. Gentleman refers to were negotiated by the previous Government; he might want to reflect on that. In both those contracts, we are reserving our contractual rights. The Cabinet Office has already withheld payments from Capita for not meeting particular milestones, so the hon. Gentleman can rest assured that we will use every lever in these contracts to enforce them.

T5. [908121] **Tom Hayes** (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Will the Minister join me in congratulating Ryan Cornish and Elliott Prentice, who are the Members of Youth Parliament for Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, and their deputies, Ruth Simpkins and Lilee Bedwell, on a fantastic year? They have not just participated in our democracy; they have strengthened it locally. I know that the Government would support that.

Darren Jones: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating his constituents. The Youth Parliament plays an important role in our democracy, and in engaging young people in it. With Mr Speaker's consent, it has the benefit of coming to this Chamber to experience what it is like. The good news is that we have already had Members of Youth Parliament become Members of Parliament as a consequence of their experience; it did not warn them off. We look forward to welcoming more of them in future generations.

T3. [908119] **Harriet Cross** (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Although we will rightly want to refrain from discussing too many details of a live espionage case, it seems, from media reporting, that the case goes beyond foreign state interference into local corruption. Will the Government today agree to publish a list of all meetings held between Bute Energy and the Government, both here in Westminster and in Wales?

Darren Jones: The hon. Lady is right that there is a counter-terror police operation under way, so it would be wrong for me to comment from the Dispatch Box, but I can reassure her and the House that the Government will co-operate fully with that investigation. When we are able to provide further updates, we will do so.

T6. [908122] **Tom Rutland** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): This week, we have seen volatility in the global energy markets, following the escalation of conflict across the middle east. Will the Minister set out how, in

the face of global turbulence, he will deepen co-operation and trade with the EU, as well as our allies across the world? My constituents are very keen to see that happen.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. We have agreed an ambitious security and defence partnership with the EU. We are negotiating a deal on carbon emissions trading. We are in exploratory talks about an electricity agreement. All those things assist with our economic and energy security, and the Conservative party is opposed to them.

T7. [908124] **Shockat Adam** (Leicester South) (Ind): There should be no issue about our civil service being paid their pensions, but 56,000 people are not receiving their pension from Capita. My constituent, Erral McDonald, is due to retire at the end of the month, and despite countless messages to the Department, he has not yet even received his pension quote. My team has no way to escalate this matter. What reassurance can the Minister provide that the backlog will be cleared, and that my constituent, and all our constituents, will receive their pensions in full and on time in the coming weeks?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: There is a robust recovery plan in place. On the specific case that the hon. Gentleman raises, if he could please ask his staff to escalate it up to me, I will look at it.

T8. [908126] **Adam Thompson** (Erewash) (Lab): Over the past few months, I have been involved in the new Long Eaton Business Partnership, which is bringing together business owners, private investors, health investors and local politicians. The goal is to shape the future of our town and revive Long Eaton's town centre. Will the Minister tell us more about her work, through the new Office for the Impact Economy, to collaborate with social investors and philanthropists to bring funding to local communities?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Satvir Kaur): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, and to the important work being done by the new Long Eaton Business Partnership. This is exactly the kind of project to which the Office for the Impact Economy adds value. I am very happy to meet him to discuss how that can be maximised in his constituency, to improve the neighbourhood for his constituents.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Given the progress made by the Infected Blood Compensation Authority, will the Paymaster General update the House? Over £140 million has been spent by the inquiry. Has he had any conversations with Sir Brian Langstaff on when will be the right time to close down that inquiry, and whether he has wider lessons about the way that public inquiries function?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, and I again pay tribute to him for his work, over some time, on this matter. He is right to highlight the significant progress that has been made on the speed of payments. He also highlights a really important point about how we will learn lessons. It is really important to learn lessons about public inquiries, their length, and providing value for money going forward.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): We are looking forward to welcoming the Paymaster General at a meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood in the near future. He knows my constituent Mary Grindley, who has been a prominent campaigner. She lost her husband, and since then has campaigned for over half her life for compensation. She has recently been in touch with me to say that those making claims for the loss of loved ones are concerned about the lack of speed with which payments are being made. Will he update the House in future, if not now, on progress in paying those who were affected, rather than infected?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The milestones that were set out for paying infected people were met by the end of 2025. The first payment to an affected person was also on time, and was made before the end of last year. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we are now moving into a new phase of paying affected people, which will clearly be a larger number. I will, of course, happily write to him with the precise figures on that.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): In the light of the arrest of three individuals yesterday for Chinese espionage, can the Minister confirm that security vetting for all special advisers is up to date?

Darren Jones: The hon. Member will remember, from the statement I gave to the House, that we are reviewing this policy area, as well as other areas to do with transparency and lobbying returns, as well as the work of the Ethics and Integrity Commission. We will come forward with further updates in due course.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The York Central 45-hectare development site will be the most powerful outside London. The Government have twice announced that they will have a government hub there. However, the Government Property Agency has not signed that off. The development is going to planning in May. Can the Minister give me an update on when we will hear the good news for York?

Darren Jones: The Cabinet Office and Government Departments are in the process of concluding their business planning processes before the start of the new fiscal year, so an update will be available very soon.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The National Security Adviser Jonathan Powell commenced his role on 2 December 2024, and his appointment was announced on 8 November 2024. I appreciate that the Minister will not have this information to hand, but I would be grateful if he could write to me and confirm when the National Security Adviser was granted security clearance for that role.

Darren Jones: I will take the question away, Mr Speaker.

Lauren Edwards (Rochester and Strood) (Lab): Earlier this week, those of us on the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee took evidence from the Cabinet Office on the significant issues with the administration of the civil service pension scheme—issues that are plaguing many of our constituents. It was quite clear that poor contract management played a role,

particularly in building up a significant backlog of cases ahead of the problematic transfer to Capita. What steps are being taken in the Cabinet Office to improve the management of contracts with private suppliers, so that this does not happen again?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and to PACAC for the work they are doing on this. As I indicated, our first priority is to deal with the immediate situation through hardship loans, and then through a robust recovery plan. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that management of these contracts and robust enforcement of contractual terms will be vital going forward.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): A few moments ago, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster indicated to me that the appointment of the head of the propriety and ethics team was done by an external recruitment process. Will he tell me how many other people were interviewed?

Darren Jones: If the hon. Gentleman is making reference to his previous question, he asked me if the appointment was in breach of the rules, to which I said no. As I have said to the House in answer to previous questions, the appointment of the head of propriety and ethics is on an interim basis, which is fully in line with the rules. A proper recruitment process will take place shortly.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): There are still serious questions to answer on the administration of the civil service pension scheme. When my constituent Campell tragically died in April last year, his wife, Gaynor, waited months to receive the death in service payment;

in December, they found out that MyCSP had paid it into the wrong bank account. I have written to the Minister about this case. Will he intervene to ensure that Capita pay Gaynor without further delay?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am happy to look into the individual case, but I repeat that the Government reserve their right under both of these contracts, whether it is the existing Capita contract or MyCSP's previous responsibilities, to take these matters up.

Alex Burghart: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am sorry to return to this subject. It is very clear that the Government do not wish to have an investigation into what happened at the meeting between Lord Mandelson, the Prime Minister and Palantir, and everything that occurred between that meeting and the direct award given to Palantir later in the year. This is clearly a possible conflict of interest. Given that the Government do not wish to investigate the matter, what options are at the disposal of the House to force such an investigation?

Mr Speaker: I think you already know. I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. As we all know, he is a very experienced Member of the House, and I know that he has already tabled a written parliamentary question on this matter. I expect Ministers to give a full and frank answer. If he requires further advice on the options available to him, I am happy to pursue this matter with the Clerks and the Table Office, and I am always happy to meet him to see how we can move things forward. I believe the answer to the hon. Gentleman's question will be honest and open. The only other thing I would expect is for it to be an early answer, and for it not to get lost in the system.

Speaker's Statement

10.32 am

Mr Speaker: I wish to read to the House a letter I have received from the Clerk of the House, Tom Goldsmith:

“Dear Mr Speaker,

I told you last year of my intention to leave the House service this Autumn. Being able to support the House as its Clerk is a huge privilege and a unique opportunity, for which I am very grateful. By October, I will have served in the House for 30 years, for the last three of them as Clerk, and I have decided that it is time to take on new and different challenges.

Working here is never boring—not least because of the passion and dedication that Members bring to their roles. I will leave with respect and fondness for Members from all parts of the House.

I also want to say how proud I am of everyone in the administration for the work they do to support the House and Members. It is an honour to be their colleague.

Finally, Mr Speaker, I want to thank you for all the support and friendship you have shown me. I will of course continue to do my best for the House until my departure at the end of October.

Yours ever,

Tom”.

I want to thank Tom for his contribution to the House. I know that right hon. and hon. Members will want to join me in wishing him all the very best for the future. There will be an opportunity for Members to put on the record their thanks to him at a later date. A recruitment process will start soon, with the intention that the successor will be identified before the House rises for the summer recess.

Speaking personally, I will miss you, Tom—although you won't be that far away when that piano needs to be played. You are the best jazz pianist I know who has cost us nothing! We look forward to the first recording of a jazz CD from you.

Business of the House

10.34 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 (Sir Alan Campbell): The business for the week commencing 9 March is as follows:

MONDAY 9 MARCH—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.

TUESDAY 10 MARCH—Second Reading of the Courts and Tribunals Bill.

WEDNESDAY 11 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Finance (No. 2) Bill.

THURSDAY 12 MARCH—General debate to mark International Women's Day.

FRIDAY 13 MARCH—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 16 March includes:

MONDAY 16 MARCH—Consideration of an allocation of time motion, followed by all stages of the Grenfell Tower Memorial (Expenditure) Bill.

TUESDAY 17 MARCH—Consideration of an allocation of time motion, followed by all stages of the Ministerial Salaries (Amendment) Bill.

Jesse Norman: I will, if I may, start by adding my very warm thanks to, and recognition of, our magnificent Clerk, Tom Goldsmith. Mr Speaker has already been indelicate enough to mention Tom's extraordinary skill at the jazz piano, but as someone who eats very much at the opposite end of the jazz food chain, may I just say that our loss of him as a Clerk will be more than made up for by his forthcoming history of British jazz? I hope the House will join me in welcoming that, because it will not write itself.

Let me start by recognising, on behalf of the whole House, all those men and women from our country and our allies who are engaged in the conflict in and around Iran. We thank them for their bravery and their service. Let us not also forget that our great ally, Ukraine, is fighting for her life in the face of an attempted and unprovoked Russian war of conquest. NATO and this country must not allow themselves to be distracted now from giving Ukraine all the support that we can.

As we approach International Women's Day this Saturday, I note that this week marks the anniversary of Nancy Astor taking her seat in 1919 as the first woman Member of Parliament—a milestone in the long journey towards wider political representation in this House.

This was a week in which three current or former members of the Labour party were arrested on charges of spying for China. The Chancellor of the Exchequer gave a spring statement that explicitly reserved any policy substance for her forthcoming Mais lecture, not for Parliament, and badly misrepresented the economic position that this country is in. We would never know from what she said that we have the highest unemployment in this country since the pandemic and that youth unemployment is in a state of crisis.

Meanwhile, the Chancellor failed to mention, let alone publish, the defence investment plan, which her Department, the Treasury, has held up for nine months. The House will note the irony that a Government who have never been willing to acknowledge the economic cost of the pandemic and the energy spike resulting from the war in Ukraine will now have to explain the economic effects of rapidly rising oil and gas prices due to the present conflict in the Gulf.

We can only hope against hope that recent events will cause the Energy Secretary—a man with the worst judgment in politics, whom the Prime Minister wanted to sack in the last reshuffle but was too weak to do so—to rethink his dangerously inadequate energy policy and refusal to develop North sea oil and gas. Perhaps we will hear a U-turn in his statement later today.

Unlike the Energy Secretary, the Leader of the House is a serious man, and I want to ask him a serious question. The Government's official story, set out by the Prime Minister at the Dispatch Box yesterday, is that they have been preparing for a US attack for several weeks. These preparations include pre-locating missile and other weapons systems in the middle east, though not sending a Type 45 frigate, which remains in dock at Portsmouth and will not depart for more than a week after the start of the conflict. It is little wonder that our allies have been so critical of the UK response.

The Prime Minister has also offered us a pre-prepared line on the legal position, which is that the present Government regard defensive operations as legal, but that it is against international law for the UK, and so presumably in his judgment for the United States and Israel, to take pre-emptive action to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, when it is the avowed policy of that state to use those weapons to destroy another sovereign state—Israel.

This is, of course, the second time in a year that the US and Israel have acted against Iran, so all these issues have already been widely discussed across Government. Yet it is now reported with some authority, across the newspapers, that the Prime Minister was actually minded to support the US attack on Friday evening but was forced to back down by a group of Ministers including the Home Secretary, the Foreign Secretary and, yes, the Energy Secretary.

It is hard to see how these things could all be true, and they raise a host of questions. If the Government have been preparing for an attack by the US and Israel for weeks, how can it be true that their policy was still undecided on Friday night? If the Prime Minister's view was that he was minded to support the attack, where does that leave the legal position? Legal experts, including the noble Lord Pannick, have criticised the Government's position as not legally "rational"—that is a quote—but my concern is more basic: whether the Government are making the legal position up as they go along, just as the Blair Government did with the Iraq war in 2003.

Finally, it now looks like the Cabinet has taken a decision with which the Prime Minister fundamentally does not agree. How can he exercise leadership under such circumstances? I do not expect the Leader of the House to comment on Cabinet discussions in any detail, of course, but I am sure that the whole House will be grateful for any explanation he can give.

Sir Alan Campbell: Let me start by joining you, Mr Speaker, and the shadow Leader of the House in thanking Tom Goldsmith for his service to this House. As you said, he gave 30 dedicated years of service and work to Parliament and is an exemplary public servant. When Tom told me his news, I said that I was pleased for him personally but disappointed for the House. He has provided exceptional leadership during challenging times, and he has always provided a steady and thoughtful approach to the procedural and constitutional issues of recent years. I want to pass on to him my and the Government's thanks for his dedication to parliamentary service and wish him well in the future.

I turn now to the comments of the shadow Leader of the House on events in the middle east. I am very grateful for his opening comments and agree with him that, whatever is happening in that part of the world, we must not take our eyes off Ukraine. The Government are absolutely determined that that is not going to happen. The events, however, are deeply concerning, and our thoughts are, as the shadow Leader of the House said, with British citizens and our brave servicemen and women in the region.

There are an estimated 300,000 British citizens across the region, and their safety and security is the Government's top priority. We are deploying rapid response teams to support British nationals, and we are in close contact with our partners, including the UAE. While the UK Government's charter flight was not able to depart Oman yesterday as planned due to technical issues, the flight is now expected to depart later today. We will continue to explore all options for helping our citizens return home as swiftly and safely as possible.

We urge British nationals in Bahrain, Israel, Kuwait, Palestine, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates to use the "register your presence" service to receive direct updates from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. The FCDO phonelines are open 24/7 to provide consular support to affected British nationals. The FCDO MP hotline is also open, and Ministers are available to meet Members to discuss individual cases. Yesterday, the Minister for the Middle East held a drop-in briefing for MPs to provide details of the support to British nationals currently in the region, and FCDO officials are currently providing a further drop-in session for all MPs in the Members' hub in Portcullis House, which is taking place as I speak.

One of the lessons from previous crisis situations like this is that sometimes the support that is set up does not work in the way that was planned, so I make an offer to Members. Should they face issues and find that they are unable to get the support that their constituents expect, I invite them to speak to my officials to see if we can help to sort it out.

It is of course important that the House is kept informed of any developments, and the Prime Minister did so at the earliest opportunity this week. There will be a further statement today, and the Government will continue to keep the House updated as the situation evolves.

I turn to security concerns, which the shadow Leader of the House touched on. Hon. Members will be aware that Counter Terrorism Policing released a statement yesterday, and the Security Minister set out the actions that the Government are taking to safeguard our democracy in this place. We will continue to take all necessary

[*Sir Alan Campbell*]

measures to protect our national interests, our citizens and our democratic way of life. I encourage any MP who experiences any suspicions or out-of-the-ordinary interactions to report them to the House authorities. The Government will continue to work in collaboration with the Parliamentary Security Department to set up a range of more tailored, bespoke briefings for those at greatest risk.

Let turn to the shadow Leader of the House's specific comments. He touched on the question of arrests. I will not speculate about any of that, because there is a live police investigation going on and it is not right that I—or anyone else—should comment. On the defence investment plan, the Secretary of State is working flat out to deliver that and will announce its findings shortly.

On the right hon. Gentleman's comments about energy, MPs will get an opportunity to question the Energy Department in a statement later today. We can also draw the opposite conclusions to those he drew, because what is happening underlines the importance of our own energy independence and security of supplies.

On actions in the Gulf and the reaction of our allies, we have a strong military presence across the region, which, as the right hon. Gentleman said, we have strengthened in recent weeks, including by sending additional Typhoons, F-35s, radar systems and helicopters. We are taking action to reduce the threat. Planes have been in the sky across the region intercepting incoming strikes. We are also deploying more capability to Cyprus. On that matter, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence met his Cypriot counterpart this morning to discuss further support for our shared security in that region.

As the Government have set out, the legal judgment is the basis for the position that the Prime Minister set out earlier this week. As he made clear, our actions are fully in line with the national interest of our country. I discourage people from speculating about some of the things that might be read in newspapers; it is far better to read or remember what the Prime Minister said in a very long statement on Monday, when in over two and a half hours of questioning he set out exactly what the Government's position is. That is how it remains.

Mr Speaker: I call Ashley Dalton—welcome to the Back Benches.

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker; I am delighted to take up this place. People in West Lancashire are concerned about the potential relocation of the children's accident and emergency department at Ormskirk following the joint integrated care board committee's "Shaping Care Together" consultation. Folk, and I, want a co-located children and adult's A&E in Ormskirk. What can my constituents do to ensure that their voice is listened to in the process?

Sir Alan Campbell: First, I thank my hon. Friend for her commitment and contribution to the Government. I am sorry that she has left government, but I wish her well in every sense. Her work on the national cancer plan will save lives and transform care—and not every Minister can say that their work has had a lasting effect. I know that she will continue to be a powerful voice on

behalf of her constituents. I reassure her that the final business case on A&E services in West Lancashire will take into account the results of the local consultation.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I join you, Mr Speaker, in thanking Tom Goldsmith for his immense service. I also wish those celebrating this weekend a happy Holi. There are three events in my constituency this weekend, and I intend to get covered in colour.

Moving on to the spring statement that we had this week, there were no policy announcements. That has left many young people feeling cut adrift. Youth unemployment is now almost a million. That is the highest rate that we have had in a decade and it is now higher than the EU average; it has become a specifically British problem that has accelerated under this Government. Why? It is not down to any one thing, but an accumulation, yet many of those things are under the Government's control. Businesses are citing the living wage, national insurance and business rates all as reasons why it is more difficult to hire young people. The Government may want to defend each of those in exclusivity—I, for one, defend the rise in the living wage—but if we pile costs on businesses all at once, there comes a point when they baulk.

We are lectured on these Benches sometimes for not supporting every Labour tax rise, as if it is the only way to get revenue for public services. Yet economics is not mere accounting. We cannot simply shift numbers from one column to another; every action has an effect. If businesses are raided for multiple taxes all at once and their response is to cut hours, cut jobs and possibly close altogether, that tax revenue does not come in. That is why business confidence is at an all-time low, growth is flatlining and we now have almost a million young unemployed. Given that youth unemployment was not addressed in the spring statement, will the Leader of the House organise for a Treasury Minister to come to the House and make a statement on youth employment so that we can hold this Government to account?

Sir Alan Campbell: Before I go on to agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman has said, let me begin by disagreeing with the position his party takes on discussions around tax, particularly business tax. It is quite simple: we cannot wish for the end without also supporting the means. That is simple and straightforward, as far as I am concerned.

As the hon. Gentleman says, youth unemployment is too high, but youth employment is also at a record high. I join him, however, in what he says about every young person deserving a chance to succeed. We are introducing a range of reforms to help young people take that vital step into the workplace. The fact is that young people were forgotten by the previous Government, and we are clearing up their mess.

The youth guarantee will help young people get into work, with 50,000 new training and workplace opportunities in sectors that include construction, health and social care, and hospitality provided to young people on universal credit to help them develop their job skills and employer networks, along with a CV and interview coach. Fifty-five thousand young people will gain from a Government-backed guaranteed job, which will roll out this spring,

and we are also expanding Youth Hub centres, where young people can receive vital help to get them back on track. That will be in every area of the country, bringing the total to over 360.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): Shrewsbury and Telford hospital NHS trust today came out of special measures for the first time since 2018. The community, the staff, the leadership of the trust and I know that there is far more to do, but this is a vital step and the hard work required should not be underestimated. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking the frontline NHS staff for their hard work? A lot has been done, but there is more to come.

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly join my hon. Friend in thanking the staff at Shrewsbury and Telford hospital trust, which has come out of special measures. That is testament to their dedication and hard work. Our plan for change is getting the NHS back on its feet, but we recognise that there is further to go. NHS staff are a vital part of that.

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

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business. I also thank you, Mr Speaker and the Deputy Speakers, for enabling yesterday's estimates day debates to go smoothly given the circumstances.

I note that the Leader of the House has not announced the business for Thursday 19 March. If we are given that date, there will be a debate on progress in tackling climate change, followed by a debate on online harms. Both are well-subscribed. In Westminster Hall next week, on Tuesday, there will be a debate on the import and sale of fur and fur-related products. On Thursday 12 March, there will be a debate on modernising marriage regulations, followed by a debate on Government support for carnivals. On Tuesday 17 March, there will be a debate on productivity and economic growth in the east midlands. On Thursday 19, there will be a debate on accessibility of banking services, and we await confirmation from the Liaison Committee on whether it will take up its option. On Tuesday 24 March, there will be a debate on sudden unexplained death in childhood. On Thursday 26th, there will be a debate on outcomes for patients with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome and craniocervical instability.

As the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean) mentioned, this week is Holi. My strong advice to anyone attending a Holi event is to wear old clothes because they will get covered in different types of paint and will probably have to be thrown away, rather than cleaning them afterwards.

On Tuesday, we had the annual celebration of Holi on the old Harrow civic centre car park site. This event has been run for many years. It is a joyful occasion, and more than a thousand people attended. However, thugs from the Central mosque left the mosque and then decided to disrupt proceedings by pulling over the speakers and disconnecting the audio system. They were then chased away by stewards. That was bad enough. They then came back with 20 more thugs and attempted to attack the people celebrating. This is in Harrow where we have excellent community relations, and I hope this will not happen anywhere else or again. But the sad

reality is community tensions are rising because of various different things across the world, and it is our responsibility as politicians to cool things down. Can we therefore have a statement next week on what will be done to cool community tensions and ensure that people can celebrate in peace and harmony, as they should be able to?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his Committee's work, including in the run-up to estimates day. They were good debates; they perhaps had slightly less time than had been anticipated, but it was right that the Security Minister came to this House to update Members on a very important security matter. I join the hon. Gentleman and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean), in wishing everyone involved a happy Holi.

I am sad to hear of the disruption that happened at celebrations in Harrow. I will not comment on the incident because it would not be right for me to do so—there is a police investigation taking place. However, any form of religious hatred is abhorrent and has no place in our society, wherever it happens. I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman on the importance of the language we use as politicians inside and outside this House. I will consider his request about social cohesion and see what we can do in the next few weeks to address his very real concern.

Jon Trickett (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): I welcome what the Leader of the House said about youth unemployment—it is essential that we tackle this problem. Unlike the Conservative party, which was happy to have 3 million people out of work under Mrs Thatcher, Labour must tackle unemployment. There is also the problem of graduate unemployment. Yesterday we had a 27-year-old constituent who came from a working-class family in an isolated pit village and who managed to get a degree. They were landed with large amounts of debt and have now spent more than a year trying to find a job. Having researched that problem, I find that it looks as though the number of graduate jobs available in our country has fallen by 45% in the last few months. I am sure the whole House feels uncomfortable about that. Can we have a debate about graduate employment, particularly in rural areas?

Sir Alan Campbell: I agree with my hon. Friend that these matters are of concern. For graduates in particular, the lack of graduate jobs is a concern, as are other matters around jobs in the economy. I suggest that he seeks an Adjournment debate on these matters. They will not be resolved in the short term, and parties across this House will have to put their thinking caps on about the job situation for graduates going forward, not least because of the impact of AI and technology on the economy. It is essential that we engage with and adopt AI and technology, but they have implications for the kind of jobs that are out there going forward.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Last Saturday, hundreds of people from across my constituency came together on a march, led by Mr and Mrs Edwards and David Smith from Aldridge, on the importance of the green belt for our communities. May we have a debate in Government time on the benefits of the green belt for our communities and our environment?

Sir Alan Campbell: The right hon. Lady again raises her concerns about these matters. Although it is true that the Government have clear targets for house building—we need to build more houses—I understand the concern in communities, including my own, about the kind of land being used. I will go away and think about what she says, but I also suggest that she seek an Adjournment debate, as she will find that her concerns are echoed by many Members from across the House.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Friern Barnet) (Lab): May I say how much I agree with the sentiment about our lovely Clerk? I look forward to hearing him play jazz.

A lot of very serious matters are going on at the moment, but we have also just passed St David's day, so may I encourage everyone to get their bicycles out? The Mayor of London has put in hundreds more kilometres of cycle lanes, and local authorities, including Haringey council, have put in loads more bicycle parking. This all makes it safer to cycle. I hope that the Government will look into this in order to create a healthier environment for us all.

Sir Alan Campbell: The Government are supporting local authorities to build and maintain walking and cycling infrastructure, with £616 million for Active Travel England from 2026 to 2030. Our investment will enable an additional 30 million journeys on foot and bike every year, helping to revitalise high streets, improve our air quality and support healthier lifestyles. Should my hon. Friend seek a debate on those matters, I am sure that she will find common cause with many Members from across the House.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): There are beautiful churches across my constituency, many of which are listed. Following the announcement that the listed places of worship scheme will be closed, I have been contacted by many church communities that are deeply concerned about what that means for them, as the scheme will no longer provide funding for Scotland, and there appears to have been little engagement with the Church of Scotland. Are there Barnett consequential arising from the new scheme, and what conversations have there been with the Scottish Government? Will the new scheme continue to offer a VAT rebate for church repairs, and, if so, will churches in Scotland be eligible? This is causing huge concern, so will the Leader of the House ensure that a Minister from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport comes to update the House?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Lady will know that she and I share a very keen interest in historical churches, which are important parts of our communities, and I understand the concern about the changes she mentions. Better than offering an opportunity for a statement or a debate, I will, if she wishes, arrange for a meeting with a DCMS Minister, so that she can raise those understandable questions directly with them.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I welcome the Government's announcements on ground rents, but many leaseholders remain at the mercy of managing agents who raise service charges while delivering poor repairs. One of my constituents has had no hot water for three months, while others still lack external wall system 1 certificates, leaving them unable to sell their homes or

know whether they are safe. Reducing ground rents tackles one issue but not the wider problem. Will the Leader of the House urge the Minister to give local authorities stronger powers to act against unscrupulous building managers and freeholders?

Sir Alan Campbell: I express my deepest sympathy for my hon. Friend's constituent. The situation described is simply unacceptable. Our draft Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Bill will end the feudal leasehold system. I reassure my hon. Friend that the measures he refers to are not the final steps. We intend to take further steps on the regulation of managing agents, and we will set out further details in due course.

Mr Bayo Alaba (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): I understand that in the United Kingdom, our universities operate as businesses independent from the Government. However, given the unacceptable lack of transparency from the senior leadership team at the University of Essex on the decision to close its Southend campus, can the Leader of the House facilitate a meeting with the Prime Minister, the Department for Education and the University of Essex leadership team to discuss the continuation of the university's presence in Southend?

Sir Alan Campbell: I understand the concerns that my hon. Friend raises. Should he wish to have a meeting with the Minister responsible for further education, I will help him to arrange one.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Recently I have been meeting firefighters in Wilton, and last night I met Andy Cole, the chief fire officer for Wiltshire and Dorset. Eight of our 50 fire stations in those two counties face closure, despite them making £15 million of annual savings since 2016. At the core of the issue, it seems, are the assumptions about growth in the council tax base, which is much higher in the Treasury's mind than it is in reality. Will the Leader of the House fix up a meeting for me with the Minister for Building Safety, Fire and Democracy, so that I can support her to push back on the Treasury to ensure that we get the right assumptions and avoid the closure of these fire stations, particularly in Wilton?

Sir Alan Campbell: Yes, I will.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Reform): In 1986, when President Ronald Reagan contacted Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to ask that Royal Air Force bases in the UK be used to attack the Gaddafi regime in Libya, she said yes. This Prime Minister has said no to the same request from the current President, refusing the use of the Chagos islands. We know that Gibraltar is under threat as well, with the deal that is apparently being agreed, which could prevent the use of Gibraltar for future defence and security. What have this Government got against the British overseas territories, and is it not time we had a debate about the importance to defence and security of the British overseas territories' contribution? Now we hear about the British bases on Cyprus. We need a debate on this, because they are vital to the defence and security of the United Kingdom and the entire free world.

Sir Alan Campbell: I am sorry to say that the hon. Gentleman appears to be confused, because we have agreed that British bases can be used by the United

States for limited and specific purposes of knocking out Iranian missile launches. This is defensive action—the purpose is to protect British lives in the region. This Prime Minister is absolutely committed to the defence of our allies in the region, and I would include other British overseas territories. When we talk about our national interests, we are talking about their interests, too.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): My constituent, Sanju Pal, who is watching from the Gallery today, fought and won a landmark case against her employer after she was unfairly dismissed when she was diagnosed with endometriosis. I wanted to mention Sanju's case today, as we approach International Women's Day, because I do not see her fight for justice as a victory just for herself—it is for the countless women across the country who talk about their medical health conditions in the workplace but are ignored. Not a single gynaecological condition is mentioned in the guidance on the Equality Act 2010. That is shameful. I ask the Leader of the House, who I know is a champion of women: can we have a debate in Government time to talk about the impact of endometriosis in the workplace and try to end this discrimination once and for all?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important and timely matter ahead of International Women's Day on Sunday. Too many women are still subject to a system that does not listen to their experience and does not understand their needs. Our renewed women's health strategy will set out our longer-term vision, so that every woman gets the healthcare she deserves. My hon. Friend may wish to raise these matters with Ministers during the debate on International Women's Day next week.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): For many of my constituents, a daily postal delivery is a fiction, with post sometimes taking weeks to arrive. That includes letters about hospital appointments and other important appointments, which often arrive after the appointments have happened. Can we have a debate in Government time on the performance of Royal Mail and its responsibilities under the universal service obligation?

Sir Alan Campbell: Unfortunately, this issue has been raised on many occasions, and the House will understand and sympathise with the experience of the hon. Gentleman's constituents, which, I am sorry to say, is all too frequent in many areas. Ofcom has fined Royal Mail three times for its service levels, and is investigating its compliance with its quality of service obligations. Royal Mail has been told urgently to publish and deliver a credible plan that delivers improvement. As the hon. Gentleman says, the public expect a well-run postal service, with letters arriving on time across the country. As he may know, the Business and Trade Committee called Royal Mail to Parliament over its performance, and I hope that Ministers will be able to report on an improvement to its service in the coming weeks.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): As we step into spring and look towards the local elections, all our attention will be drawn to the quality of our local neighbourhoods. It is clear, after a decade under the previous Government, that our

neighbourhoods are still frayed, whether through potholes on our roads, the quality of our neighbourhoods because of fly-tipping, or the standard of our parks as people go out to enjoy them. Given that such issues are a cross-Government responsibility, and local government has an important delivery role, does the Leader of the House share my view that there is perhaps a role for a cross-Government taskforce on rebuilding neighbourhood services in every community across the country?

Sir Alan Campbell: The Government are absolutely on this; we are ensuring that billions of pounds are available to local authorities so that potholes can be fixed. That seems a particularly current issue, not least because of the wet winter; but that does not matter—they need to be fixed. The Government are also committed, through the Pride in Place programme, to ensuring that neighbourhoods not only get investment, but that people living in those places are in charge of making decisions about their future. I will certainly put to the Secretary of State my hon. Friend's suggestion.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): I also wanted to raise potholes, because potholes are plaguing many roads in Haywards Heath in my constituency, including Perrymount Road, which feels a bit like driving over the surface of the moon. Conservative-run West Sussex county council has failed for years with temporary patch repairs that are both a disaster and a waste of money. How can West Sussex get better than this?

Sir Alan Campbell: As I have said, the Government are committed to more investment, but that requires local authorities to perform—that was the bit I missed out. Local authorities have an obligation to do that, and I hope that the hon. Lady's local authority area has heard her words today.

Paula Barker (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): Transforming Choice, led by Frances Molloy and her amazing team, is an alcohol detox and rehabilitation service based in Sefton Park in my constituency. It does incredible work to support people who are struggling with alcohol dependency and who have often also experienced homelessness, and the results are literally life-changing. It is supported in turn by Penny Lane Builders, who maintain its heating free of charge, ensuring that people accessing this life-changing service have heating and hot water—a totally selfless act and a demonstration of social cohesion. Will the Leader of the House join me in praising Transforming Choice and Penny Lane Builders, and will he make time for a debate in Government time on the social purpose of businesses, and the vital role that those like Penny Lane Builders play in their local communities, which often goes unnoticed?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly join my hon. Friend in praising what is happening in her constituency and across her city. She is on a bit of a roll, because next week she has secured a debate in Westminster Hall on rough sleeping among families with children. When she has finished with that, she may well seek a further debate to address the follow-on issues, including those she has raised this morning.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Last Thursday the Minister for Energy visited my constituency, which was much appreciated, to discuss the fall-out

[*Martin Vickers*]

from Lindsey oil refinery going into administration, and how we boost the local economy following the number of redundancies that will occur. As business leaders keep pointing out to me, it is vital that we improve transport connections to northern Lincolnshire, so will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate about that, or perhaps a meeting for me and other local MPs with the appropriate Minister?

Sir Alan Campbell: I will certainly arrange a meeting for the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues in the region. As he says, this is a question not just of energy and the businesses themselves, but of accessibility through good transport, so I will certainly help him to arrange that meeting.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): Events of the past week serve as a reminder of the contribution that our armed forces personnel play every day. Many of our veterans will suffer from trauma, anxiety and a range of mental health issues during their career and retirement. The charity Combat Stress is running a “March in March” fundraiser to support the vital work it does for our veterans. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing good luck to my nephew, Stanley Whatling, and the others from Gilberd combined cadet force team who are taking part in this fundraising event, and will he schedule an oral statement on the support being provided to veterans?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the important work of our armed forces. I absolutely join her in wishing all the very best to Stanley and all those involved in the “March in March” fundraiser, and I thank them. We are committed to supporting our brave veterans, and I thank all service personnel, past and present, for their service, as well as everyone involved with the cadets. We are putting greater emphasis on cadets, who do such an important job across our communities.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): Torkington Park, in my Hazel Grove constituency, is a beautiful place to spend time, but many of my constituents have been contacting me recently with concerns about raw sewage in the stream. They are really concerned about their children and their pets playing in there, and it appears that it is all down to dodgy connections from some housing that has been built going directly into the stream. Can we have a debate in Government time to flush out these issues across our constituencies, and to hold the Environment Agency, the water companies and housing developers properly to account?

Sir Alan Campbell: I invite the hon. Lady to seek an Adjournment debate because, as she has pointed out, these are often multifaceted problems. Should she be able to secure that, she will be able to set out her case in more detail.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): Has the Leader of the House had the opportunity to see the shocking Channel 4 programme “Dirty Business”? It brought to my mind Mr Binks of Stowmarket, who showed me a collection of photographs of the River Gipping over 50 years. They showed a once navigable

river, full of fish and clear water, which is now blocked with fallen trees, brown water and neglected banks, causing repeated flooding. Does the Leader of the House agree with me that that is a consequence of the previous Conservative Governments’ disastrous deregulation of the water industry, which has ruined our rivers?

Sir Alan Campbell: I agree with my hon. Friend’s analysis of where the problem ultimately lies. This Government are committed to cleaning up our waterways and tackling waste crime. We have boosted the Environment Agency’s waste crime enforcement budget by over 50% and we are giving councils powers to crush the vehicles of suspected fly-tippers. I encourage my hon. Friend to apply for a debate on those matters, which will ensure not only that the relevant Minister is present but allow other hon. Members to echo my hon. Friend’s concerns.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Can we have a debate in Government time on defensive military operations in the middle east?

Sir Alan Campbell: There will be a statement later, and going forward I am committed to the House being updated regularly on those matters.

Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab): On Wednesday, I joined midwifery students protesting in Parliament Square. I spoke to Kelly McDermott, who is facing the reality that 31% of newly qualified midwives cannot find jobs, which the Royal College of Midwives puts down to poor workforce planning. Will the Leader of the House join me in commending the incredible care that midwives give women? Will he also join me in calling on the Health Secretary to ensure that this Government will finally provide the step change in investment that our maternity services desperately need?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly join my hon. Friend in championing our exceptionally hard-working midwives. Our 10-year workforce plan will ensure that the NHS has the right people, in the right place, with the right skills to care for patients. We have already recruited more than 800 extra midwives and invested over £140 million to deal with critical safety risks on maternity wards. I will ensure my hon. Friend gets a response from the Health Secretary on the specific concerns that she raises.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Coastal erosion has caused immense damage in South Devon to homes, businesses and a vital A road. The impact of winter storms this year illustrates the need for joined-up thinking in Government and for support for local government in coping financially with the eye-watering costs of repair. Can we have a debate in Government time about the need for a cross-departmental coastal erosion unit that brings together all the necessary parts of Government to respond in a co-ordinated way to events such as these, which have left one of my communities completely battered?

Sir Alan Campbell: There are ways in which Government already seek to work in a comprehensive way to address these issues. If the hon. Lady wishes to have a meeting with the relevant Minister on the resilience of local communities regarding these issues, which are not going to go away, I will arrange it for her.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): This Wednesday marked Holi, a festival celebrated by millions around the world and here in the UK. Last year, I had the privilege of celebrating Holi with Hindu cultural groups in West Drayton and Uxbridge. We threw colourful paint and played traditional games, and children described what the first Holi festival that they celebrated meant to them. They will be celebrating again this Sunday, so will the Leader of the House join me in wishing them and all our constituents a happy Holi? Will he thank them for the contribution that they make to our communities and our country?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly join my hon. Friend and, I am sure, the rest of the House in wishing all our constituents a happy Holi. Festivals such as Holi bring our communities together—something that is more important than ever.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): As the MP for Gretna Green, the wedding capital of Europe, I particularly welcome next week's debate on modernising marriage laws. I encourage all colleagues to take part in that.

The last few days have marked the 25th anniversary of the 2001 foot and mouth disease outbreak. That had devastating effects in my constituency: virtually every hoofed animal was slaughtered. As a Member of the Scottish Parliament at the time, I remember how the smoke lay over the Annan valley as animal carcasses were burned on open pyres. The local economy took a long time to recover from that incident. Will the Leader of the House bring forward a debate to reflect properly on those events, praise the resilience of the communities involved, which have bounced back, and ensure that lessons have been learned?

Sir Alan Campbell: I remember that too. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for reminding us of those devastating events and the impact that they had on lives and livelihoods at the time and for much longer afterwards. I join him in praising the resilience of the communities that were hit the hardest in those days, including his own. We are providing £1 billion for a new national biosecurity centre to protect farmers from the impact of disease, but I encourage him to apply for an Adjournment debate to remind the House and Ministers of the events, so that we can set out how we have learned and are learning those lessons.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): May I also place on record my best wishes to you, Mr Speaker, and to colleagues across the House for Holi? On a personal note, if you are looking to get covered in Holi colours, I am more than happy to organise that in Lancashire or in Stockport.

On a separate note, it is concerning that many unlicensed and illegal driving instructors are operating across the UK. Some are offering lessons without proper certification, and others are exploiting learners through unofficial test bookings. Illegal instructors undermine our road safety, put learners at risk and threaten the integrity of our driving test system. I have heard from local reputable driving instructors in Stockport, including Mr Jules Musgrove from JSM Driving, about the dangers of that, and I have tabled a number of written parliamentary questions on the matter. I have been informed that the Driving and Vehicle Standards Agency received 927 reports

of illegal instruction and 2,133 reports of fraud concerning theory and practical tests. May I request that the Leader of the House allocate Government time for a debate on measures to strengthen enforcement against illegal driving instructors?

Mr Speaker: Before the Leader of the House responds, can I help everybody? I intend to finish business questions at 12 noon, but we still have a lot of Members to speak. Can we have punchy questions and shorter answers? I am sure that the Leader of the House will be the best example of that.

Sir Alan Campbell: I am sure, Mr Speaker.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) for raising those matters. Should he seek a meeting with a Minister to explain his concerns, I will help him to get that. We have already doubled the number of trainers for examiners and provided more than 120,000 additional tests between June 2025 and January 2026. We will ensure that only learner drivers can book or reschedule tests, and we will stop exploitation by online bots.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Masjid al-Aqsa in Jerusalem is the third holiest site for over 2 billion Muslims worldwide. Thousands of Brits make a pilgrimage to Masjid al-Aqsa every year, but unfortunately countless are not allowed into the country and many who do make it are not allowed into the compound. A recent survey that I conducted found that 330 out of 390 respondents encountered issues accessing the compound, and some were not allowed in at all, while facing racial abuse at the same time. Despite writing to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office several months ago to discuss these findings, I have had absolutely no response from Ministers. Will the Leader of the House please address this matter with the relevant Department and say what further assurance he can give to all those who go to pray in the Holy Land, so that they can keep safe and pray safely?

Sir Alan Campbell: I will do that and make sure that the hon. Member gets a response.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): Dartford's brilliant Wentworth primary school—whose notable former pupils include the wonderful Sir Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, as well as UK gold medal-winning sprinter Adam Gemili—turns 75 next month. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing the school, the headteacher Mr Pollock and its wonderful staff, governors and pupils a very happy birthday?

Sir Alan Campbell: I will certainly join my hon. Friend in congratulating Wentworth primary school and wishing all the staff and students, both past and present, a happy birthday. As he says, there have been some notable alumni over the last 75 years, and I am sure that will continue in the next 75 years.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): My constituents regularly complain about private parking companies. Recent examples include a firm passing a case to debt collectors after the constituent provided evidence that they were ill and another issuing a charge when the driver had paid but the machine failed. Following last September's consultation on raising standards in

[*Claire Young*]

the private parking industry, will the Leader of the House confirm when the Government will bring forward a new code of practice and compliance framework to protect drivers from exploitative parking operators?

Sir Alan Campbell: I cannot confirm when, but I know that this issue is uppermost in the minds of Ministers, because it is a problem in many communities, and I will take it up with the relevant Department and get the hon. Lady an answer.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): Liverpool has the oldest established Chinese community across Europe. This year it marks the 80th anniversary of the then Labour Government's deportation of thousands of Chinese seamen after the second world war—an act that left women and children abandoned and generations without answers. Will the Government make time for a full debate on the impact of that heinous act so that we can finally acknowledge the injustice, provide full transparency and an unreserved apology, and support descendants still seeking the truth about their loved ones? Will the Leader of the House also ask a Minister to respond to my letters, please?

Sir Alan Campbell: I would encourage my hon. Friend to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can hear from the relevant Minister directly.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): One of my Bath constituents who is a leaseholder in a housing association-managed development has received sudden and extremely high major works bills without warning. There is currently no statutory requirement for landlords or housing associations to operate sinking or reserve funds to spread the costs of major works over time. Many leaseholders are then exposed to large, unexpected charges at short notice. Will the Leader of the House reach out to colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to draw attention to this growing problem and encourage them to consider introducing statutory guidance or regulations on sinking funds to better protect our constituents?

Sir Alan Campbell: As I said in a previous answer, we have produced the draft commonhold and leasehold reform Bill. However, it is not the full extent of the Government's ambitions in this regard, so I will draw the issue that the hon. Lady raises to the attention of the relevant Minister to see whether they can be addressed in the other steps that we are considering.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to ask a business question. I want to raise concerns regarding the detention of Pastor Ezra Jin Mingri, the leader of Zion church, who was arrested during co-ordinated raids across several cities in China. Zion church is an unregistered Protestant church that was previously closed after declining to install state-mandated surveillance equipment. His family state that they have had no contact with him since his detention. These developments are part of wider reports of increased pressure on independent Christian communities. Will the Leader of the House please ask the Foreign Secretary to set out what representations the Government have

made to the Chinese authorities regarding these detentions and say what steps have been taken to raise concerns about freedom of religion and belief in China?

Sir Alan Campbell: I know that this case has been raised this week by the special envoy for freedom of religion and belief, my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), and there is clearly a strength of feeling around the pastor's detention. The reports are a worrying indication of the persecution of Christians in China. We engage with China on freedom of religion, and we will continue to do so. I will make sure that the hon. Gentleman gets a response from the Foreign Secretary on these important matters.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): Earlier this morning, I joined Samaritans at Waterloo station for the launch of its "Small Talk Saves Lives" campaign, which encourages people to start simple conversations with those who look as though they may be in distress. Can we have a debate in Government time on the importance of mental health campaigning in helping to save lives across the UK?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that mental health campaigning is vital to saving lives, and she is a tireless and assiduous campaigner. I congratulate her on her work; we must thank her for it. Organisations such as Samaritans do incredible work to support the most vulnerable, and to educate the public about how to help. I encourage my hon. Friend to apply for an Adjournment debate, so that she and others can raise their concerns and get a better idea of what will happen going forward.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): Lancashire county council's consultation on the closure of care homes and adult day centres is now closed, and the decision lies with the Reform-led council. Adult day centres in my constituency, such as Vale View, are at a real risk of closure. May I ask for a debate in Government time about the value that day care centres offer both the users and the families who support them?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for her campaigning on these matters. I am absolutely at one with her in recognising the importance of day centres, which are a vital part of the provisions to support disabled children and their families. I join her in urging the Reform-led council to take its responsibilities seriously and to pay attention to the issues that have been raised here today. Once again, we are hearing of Reform-led councils that over-promise and under-deliver.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare) (Lab): Members will have heard me speak on numerous occasions about the high cost of petrol in Merthyr Tydfil, where prices have for many months been around 10p per litre higher than in many neighbouring areas and, indeed, higher than here in London, and I have asked the Competition and Markets Authority to intervene. Some retailers in Merthyr Tydfil and the surrounding areas have raised prices since the start of the military action in the middle east, even as events were unfolding, leading to accusations of profiteering. Will the Leader of the House please make time for a debate on the actions being taken to protect consumers from arbitrary price rises?

Sir Alan Campbell: There will be a statement later today on energy matters, and I encourage my hon. Friend to raise this issue. The Government are committed to ensuring that consumers have the necessary information at their disposal to find the best-value petrol prices.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): Next month, 15 April marks the 37th anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster, where 97 innocent children, women and men were unlawfully killed and countless lives were ruined. It was the beginning of the well-documented state cover-up that followed. With that in mind, can the Leader of the House provide clarity to this House, and to the families and campaigners who fought so long for the Hillsborough law—a key commitment in our manifesto—on when the Public Office (Accountability) Bill will return for its Report stage?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for his dedication to this important matter, and to the families in his community who were involved in that terrible event. We are working tirelessly to reach an agreed position, but it is important, as he knows, that we get this absolutely right. Should he seek a meeting with Ministers to get the latest update, I will help him to get that, and I will announce future business in the usual way. Let me reassure him that we are determined to make progress on this matter.

Jeff Smith (Manchester Withington) (Lab): Sixteen banks have closed in Manchester Withington in the last five years, and the impending closure of the NatWest in Chorlton and the Halifax in Didsbury means there will be just one bank left in my constituency. Most of us bank online nowadays, but individuals and businesses still need to access local services. I do think there are questions about whether the proposed number of banking hubs is sufficient and whether the criteria are correct. It is good that a Westminster Hall debate on banking services has been scheduled, but can I ask the Leader of the House for a debate in Government time on the specific issue of banking hubs?

Sir Alan Campbell: We recognise the importance of face-to-face services, and that banks are expected to follow Financial Conduct Authority guidance on branch closures and to support their customers. As he says, we are supporting the industry with the roll-out of 350 banking hubs, with 210 already open, and everyday banking services can also be accessed through the Post Office, but he raises an important matter on behalf of his constituents. Should he seek a meeting with the relevant Minister, I will help him to get one.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): A constituent has been on a waiting list for over two years with no end in sight. After waiting this long without progress, they wrote to me about their referral being moved to an equidistant clinic with shorter waits, yet NHS Forth Valley has as yet been unable to facilitate that. Does the Leader of the House agree that everyone, including trans people such as my constituent, deserves timely access to the right healthcare?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is a strong advocate for his constituents, and I pay tribute to him for that. As he will know, healthcare is a devolved matter, but we do

acknowledge that trans people have historically not been able to access the support they need. We are committed to ensuring that the NHS is there for everyone, providing equal access to healthcare for everyone.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Fly-tipping is a blight on our communities. It should not happen and it is wrong. It spoils and damages communities, and I see far too much fly-tipping up and down my constituency. Lewisham council is doing an excellent job—a fantastic job, even—in doing all it can to manage this, but would the Leader of the House agree with me that we need a wider Government strategy on how to manage and deal with fly-tipping across our country?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. The Government are committed to tackling waste crime, including fly-tipping, which, as she says, is a blight on our local communities. This topic affects a lot of Members, so I encourage her to apply for what I am sure would be a popular Westminster Hall debate, and to put her interesting proposition to and hear directly from a Minister.

Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab): Smashed Live, an educational programme delivered by Collingwood Learning, which is based in Holmfirth, teaches young people to think critically about the dangers of under-age drinking. It was recently performed at Honley high school in my constituency. Given that, by the age of 15, 62% of pupils in England will have had an alcoholic drink, will the Leader of the House please consider dedicating time to a debate on the importance of early education about alcohol?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend raises a worrying matter, and I thank him for mentioning the important work of Collingwood Learning. Early education about alcohol is already compulsory, and the updated relationships, sex and health education guidance provides additional content on the risks associated with alcohol consumption. I encourage him to apply for an Adjournment debate on this matter, not just because it is important, but because others across the House will share his concerns.

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): Councillors are the bedrock of their communities, working tirelessly on behalf of residents. I know this from my own time as a local councillor. Waseem Zaffar was an outstanding and much-loved Birmingham councillor, who served his constituents with passion and distinction, and his recent passing at the age of 44 is a great loss. Given the invaluable contribution of local government representatives, may I ask the Leader of the House for a debate in Government time to recognise the vital role that local councillors play in our communities?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join my hon. Friend in thanking councillors across the country and in recognising their important contribution, whichever party they represent. They are an important part of our local democracy. I also join her in sending our condolences to the family and friends of her local councillor. She is right to raise this matter, and as we approach the local elections, should she seek an Adjournment debate, I am sure she could give even greater voice to the importance of councillors in our local democracy.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Alex Mayer.

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): Young coach drivers are severely limited in the distances they are allowed to drive. Trying to get to London from your constituency, Madam Deputy Speaker, they would only make it as far as Sheffield. The Government have recently closed a consultation on this issue. Could the Leader of the House let us know when we will get a response? It seems very strange that people of the same age are able to drive a 44-tonne lorry, but not a coach for any considerable distance.

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend raises some important issues. The Government recognise that the bus and coach sector has had issues recruiting and retaining bus drivers in recent years. As she says, we are considering next steps. I will make sure that she gets an update once this process has been completed.

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): Can the Leader of the House make Government time available for a debate on involving young people in decision making? When I recently visited primary 6 classes at St Monica's primary school in my constituency, they made thoughtful points about issues in their local Milton community and their aspirations for the area. Does the Leader of the House agree that we should do more to ensure that young people's voices genuinely shape the decisions that impact them?

Sir Alan Campbell: The short answer is yes, I do. We ran one of the biggest national conversations that the Government have had with young people to produce our national youth strategy, which we published in December last year, but we need to make sure that that process continues. Should my hon. Friend seek an Adjournment debate, I am sure that it would be well attended.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): Yesterday marked the one-year anniversary of my constituent Jagtar Singh Johal's acquittal of all charges in the only court case against him in India that has actually proceeded to trial. Despite that, he remains arbitrarily detained in an Indian prison, as he has been for more than eight years now. Will the Leader of the House agree to meet me, together with his ministerial colleagues from the Foreign Office, to discuss our Government's plan and what progress has been made to secure Mr Johal's release and return home to Dumbarton? Just raising it with Indian counterparts is not achieving any progress.

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for his sustained campaign on behalf of Mr Johal. We continue to push for faster progress. As he says, the case has been raised directly by the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary with their counterparts. I will ensure that my hon. Friend gets an update on these matters from Ministers. If he wishes to raise it with them directly, I will make sure that he gets a meeting.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Synthetic cathinones, commonly known as monkey dust, are a stimulant drug causing significant harm in Stoke-on-Trent. These substances can cause severe psychosis and trigger acute health risk in the very vulnerable

people who turn to them, which is having a significant impact on our local communities and public services. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on synthetic cathinones?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising an important issue. The use of synthetic drugs is concerning and we are taking action to tackle this challenge. Law enforcement continues to seek new methods to identify these new, concerning types of drugs, but as a former drugs Minister, I remember how difficult these matters are. I note that my hon. Friend has raised her concerns directly with the Home Secretary at oral questions. If she wishes to have a meeting with the drugs Minister to pursue the matter further, I will help her to arrange one.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): Morrisons has resigned from managing the Thorley Park post office, putting the future of an important local centre at risk. I have joined with a cross-party group of local councillors to write to the local Sainsbury's and encourage it to host the branch, as the Post Office can only keep the branch open if local retailers come forward to take it on. Will the Leader of the House join me in encouraging Sainsbury's, local retailers and entrepreneurs to take on this important local service?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join my hon. Friend in recognising the essential role that post offices play in communities across the country, and the important role that Morrisons and other retailers play in ensuring that services continue. We have set out, in our post office Green Paper, our views on what should happen in the next few years, but I hope that local retailers who are able to help in this situation have heard my hon. Friend's voice today. I hope there can be a resolution in this case.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I recently had the pleasure of visiting Base 25, a dedicated charity supporting young people with special educational needs and disabilities, to formally launch its new youth café provision in my constituency. Among the vital services it provides is the Government-funded WorkWell programme, which supports young people in returning to education, employment or training. Will the Leader of the House join me in commending the wonderful work that Base 25 does? Does he agree that we need to make more use of community-based organisations, such as Base 25, to support our schools with SEND provision, so that our young people and their families can receive the co-ordinated and effective help that they need to achieve the best possible outcomes?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly join my hon. Friend in commending the vital work of Base 25 and all its staff to support those with SEND. As he is aware, the SEND system is broken. We are determined to reform it, in order to transform the life chances of every child with additional needs, but come what may, community organisations will continue to play a vital role in supporting not only those with SEND, but their families.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Today is World Book Day. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the winner of my World Book Day competition, Matilda Mann of Littleborough Community

primary school, for her brilliant review of “A Box Full of Murders” by Janice Hallett, and congratulate all the local businesses that helped to sponsor hundreds of pounds-worth of books for our local schools?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is right to champion World Book Day. I absolutely join him in congratulating Matilda, and thank all the local businesses that supported the World Book Day competition in his constituency.

Frank McNally (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): My constituent Mr Fraser, a former prison officer, retired in 2020. He has been met with constant barriers and a lack of answers regarding his pension. I have sought clarity on this case, but have not received the reason for the unacceptable delay that there has been. Like many others, Mr Fraser is facing undisclosed barriers to receiving what he is entitled to. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the administration of civil service pensions, and on the McCloud remedy in particular, to ensure that Mr Fraser and others receive the pension that they worked so hard for?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am sorry to hear about the case my hon. Friend raises. Those delays are simply unacceptable. This is not the service that people deserve, and resolving this is a matter of urgency. If my hon. Friend shares the details of this case with me, I will raise it directly with Ministers and ensure that he gets a response.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): My constituents in Burntwood have been waiting for a new GP practice since 2009. Over 16 years of cancellations, missed deadlines and broken promises, people have had to visit their doctor in a temporary facility made out of portacabins in the leisure centre car park. We thought things were going to get better when the town was finally promised that the replacement centre would be open in 2025—yet another deadline missed. It was revealed this week that the planning application for the facility will not be submitted until late July, or possibly August. That is not acceptable. Will the Leader of the House raise this issue with Ministers in the Department of Health and Social Care, and ask what they can do to tell Reform-controlled Staffordshire county council to get its finger out, stop breaking promises to the people of Burntwood, and get this facility built?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is a tireless campaigner for his constituents, and I commend him for that. The NHS has a statutory duty to ensure sufficient medical provision, including GPs, in each local area. We have confirmed the funding for integrated care boards through to 2030, so that ICBs can plan for the long term, but I join my hon. Friend in urging the Reform-led council to take its responsibilities seriously, and to listen to the points that he has raised so powerfully today.

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): Many former mineworkers in my constituency are entitled to receive a set amount of solid fuel per year. As few homes now rely on coal, some have requested a payment in lieu from the National Concessionary Fuel Office, as they are entitled to. Those requests have often been refused, yet following intervention from my office, payments have subsequently been awarded. Will the Leader of the House ask Ministers to review the work of the National

Concessionary Fuel Office to ensure that former mineworkers in my constituency and across the country receive the payments to which they are entitled?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is a strong campaigner for his constituents. Due to pressure from him and others, Ministers agreed last year to relax the “continuous facility to burn” criterion, which will allow more people to claim cash in lieu. I will ensure that Ministers hear his concerns—not just about individual cases, but about how the scheme is administered—and that he gets a response.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): English Tourism Week begins next week. Running from 13 to 22 March, it aims to highlight the importance of tourism to the UK economy. During it, I look forward to visiting Grime’s Graves, a neolithic flint mine in South West Norfolk operated by English Heritage. Will the Leader of the House join me in celebrating the benefits of tourism? Can a debate be held to explore Government support for the tourism industry?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the vital contribution of tourism to our national economy. Like him, I am lucky enough to have a constituency that is a popular tourist destination and has a large number of attractions, and I would encourage people to visit. Grime’s Graves is an extraordinary site. I am pleased to hear that he will visit a historical place in his constituency in English Tourism Week, and I encourage other Members to do the same. I think this would be an interesting topic for a Backbench Business or Adjournment debate, should he wish to seek one.

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): The children of Belford primary school in my constituency recently wrote to me on a range of subjects. One of them said:

“There are too many people using fossil fuels in Northumberland. It is hurting the earth’s surface and increasing global warming. Please can you encourage people to stop using fossil fuels and walk or bike to more places”.

The events of recent weeks have shown that we cannot rely on fossil fuels. Does the Leader of the House agree that the Government’s plans for Great British Energy will enable the growth of local community clean energy projects in Northumberland and across the country, making us more safe in the process?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this question. The Government are wasting no time in our mission to make Britain a clean energy superpower and tackle the climate crisis, both for people living in his beautiful constituency, and for people living in other parts of the country. Great British Energy will ensure that British bill payers reap the benefits of clean, secure, home-grown energy. Our local power plan will support more than 1,000 local clean energy projects. That is about not just making sure that we have sustainable and safe energy, but supplying jobs.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): The Beatles did not quite sing about 1,000 holes in Rugby, Warwickshire, but we do have a problem with potholes—I do not know whether they still have a problem with potholes in Blackburn, Lancashire. I commend the staff of Warwickshire county

[John Slinger]

council for filling 718 of the 1,127 potholes reported since the beginning of January, but there are still 409 holes remaining to be filled. My constituents are furious about the state of the roads in Rugby. The Government have put Warwickshire on the amber traffic light for potholes, despite this Labour Government putting in huge sums of money—£1.6 billion last year, with £25 million for Warwickshire. There is also £7.3 billion for local authorities in the Budget, and there was an additional £6 million for Warwickshire recently. Will the Leader of the House join me in urging Reform-led Warwickshire county council to get on with using the money provided by this Labour Government to fill those potholes, and might he grant Government time for a debate on whether local authorities always implement policies, and use money provided by Government, as this Government hope they will?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this important matter to the House. He is right to highlight the action that the Government are taking on potholes; we are providing a record £7.3 billion boost for councils over the next four years. I do hope that the Reform-led council in Warwickshire hears my hon. Friend's contribution today and takes action; otherwise, it will be a further example of Reform over-offering and under-delivering.

ROYAL ASSENT

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that His Majesty has signified his Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Medical Training (Prioritisation) Act 2026

Rare Cancers Act 2026

Sustainable Aviation Fuel Act 2026.

Consular Assistance

11.55 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will update the House on developments in the middle east.

Everyone in this House, and across this country, will be horrified by what is unfolding—by the wave after wave of reckless Iranian missile strikes, by the loss of life, and by the fact that many thousands of British citizens are caught up in this crisis. Let me begin by offering my condolences to the families of civilian casualties from across the region. We stand in solidarity with allies and partners targeted by Iran. I condemn in the strongest terms these appalling strikes.

Yesterday, I summoned Iran's ambassador to the United Kingdom, in response to his country's reckless actions. Iran must be held accountable. The safety of British nationals remains my top priority. There are around 300,000 of them in the region that is being targeted by Iranian strikes. The numbers reflect the deep ties between Britain and our friends in the Gulf. These countries did not attack Iran, and were not involved in the initial hostilities, yet they are being subjected to thousands of ballistic missile and drone attacks. Continued airspace closures and restrictions are making it extremely hard for many people to get home. Families on holiday and business travellers are having to shelter from attacks. I understand the anxiety and the frustration that this is causing.

I thank the almost 140,000 British nationals who have signed up to register their presence across Bahrain, Israel, Kuwait, Palestine, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. That is helping us to know exactly where people are, so that we can provide timely updates and support. If anyone watching this statement has a vulnerable family member, or particular concerns, please contact our helpline, which is manned by Foreign Office staff 24/7. The number is: 0207 008 5000.

I pay tribute to the United Arab Emirates Government and all our regional allies for their efforts and generosity to our nationals stuck in the region. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is working round the clock to support British nationals. We are working intensively with airlines, travel companies and regional Governments to find safe routes home on commercial flights. The Foreign Secretary had productive discussions yesterday with the Emirates president, Sir Tim Clark, on ways forward, and also with the British Airways chief executive officer, Sean Doyle.

Airlines have been able to reinstate some commercial flights from Abu Dhabi and Dubai, and are working to support passengers. As the House will be aware, some flights are now operating out of the United Arab Emirates. More than 2,000 people arrived in the UK on eight flights from the UAE yesterday. That included transit passengers and vulnerable people identified through our consular system. We are expecting a further 10 flights today.

Let me turn to Oman. Following close engagement with the Government, British Airways has laid on new flights to Muscat, which we anticipate flying every day. We are grateful to British Airways for its efforts. We are

also providing UK-supported charter flights out of Muscat, the first of which was delayed yesterday evening due to technical issues at the airport, but it is scheduled to depart imminently, with further flights planned in the coming days. British nationals in Oman will be contacted about those as they become available.

In addition, we have deployed rapid deployment teams on the ground to help facilitate onward travel for British nationals. I can confirm to the House that a further RDT has been deployed in the last 24 hours. We will continue to provide the latest information and will be constantly reviewing and updating our travel advice. I encourage everybody watching this statement who is affected to sign up to our travel advice.

I must be clear that we are tackling a consular challenge on a scale not seen since covid. There are no instant solutions for moving such numbers of people, especially while airspace restrictions remain in place, but I am determined that people should get home as safely and as swiftly as possible. In total, over 4,000 people arrived in the UK from five different countries in the region yesterday.

Turning briefly to the wider situation, the Prime Minister has been clear that we are not engaged in any military action against Iran, but we are supporting our allies and our partners, particularly in the Gulf, to defend themselves against unprovoked attacks on their territory. Since Saturday morning, multiple F-35s and Typhoons have been operating on a defensive mission to identify and shoot down cruise missiles and drones, not just in the middle east but in the eastern Mediterranean, joining the extra forces deployed to the region prior to this crisis.

Further missions were flown overnight, with Typhoons defending Qatar in particular and F-35s defending our other regional partners. We are resupplying our air defence missiles today. Wildcat helicopters with anti-drone capabilities will be in the eastern Mediterranean this week. HMS Dragon will shortly be deployed to the Mediterranean.

As the Prime Minister has set out, RAF Akrotiri is not being used by US bombers. The Defence Secretary is in Cyprus today, where he has just met Cypriot Defence Minister Vasilis Palmas. They discussed what the UK is doing to reinforce our defences to support our shared security. The House is aware that the Prime Minister has also agreed that US aircraft may fly out of UK bases for the specific and limited purposes linked to defending against Iran's reckless attacks—attacks that are threatening our partners, our interests and our allies, including our friends in the Gulf.

Strong allies are honest with each other, and we were clear with the United States that the UK would not be involved in the initial US and Israeli strikes on Iran. As the Prime Minister has said to the House, we stand by both decisions, taken squarely in the UK's national interest and in line with international law. That is the action we are taking. That is the agreement we have reached with the United States to protect our nationals and our allies.

The situation is evolving, and there are indications that this is a crisis not of days but of weeks and possibly months. We are focused not just on the immediate term. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero will shortly address the House regarding the impact of this crisis on energy costs and the cost of living.

We are under no illusion about the nature of the Iranian regime. As the Foreign Secretary has said, its leaders have for decades terrorised and murdered their own people, destabilised the region and exported threats and instability around the world, including here on UK soil. Iranian people took to the streets just last month demanding change. They were met instead with bloody and brutal repression. We assess that at least 7,000 were murdered, with bodies lining the streets—the deadliest unrest in Iran's modern history.

We must guard against the country sliding into chaos, exploited by extremists, and against a protracted regional conflict spiralling further. We continue to call on Iran to end these reckless strikes. We will work tirelessly for the swiftest possible resolution to this crisis, in line with Britain's interests and with lasting regional security and stability. I commend this statement to the House.

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

12.4 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I put on record the Opposition's thanks to officials working to get British nationals home and to our partners in the region for their exceptional support and the assistance they are giving to British nationals who are stuck in Gulf Co-operation Council countries. Iran is a world-leading state sponsor of terrorism. It plots lethal attacks on British soil and has murdered a generation of its own citizens. It poses an intolerable threat from its nuclear programme, ballistic missiles and hostile interference. Now, it is targeting British nationals. It has attacked RAF Akrotiri, putting hundreds of lives at risk, and it is attacking our allies in the region with unprovoked aggression. Britain cannot sit on the fence. Our adversaries must know that we will not stand back when our allies are under such attack.

I pay tribute to our incredible armed forces on British bases; their families are in our thoughts. Hundreds of thousands of British nationals are stuck in the region. Following the failed repatriation flight last night, they want to know what the Government are doing to bring them back home. They are trapped in the region, and getting them back is an enormous exercise. Ministers must be honest about all their actions. How many British nationals do the Government have the capacity to repatriate through charter flights?

Our Gulf friends have negotiated an air corridor, which both Emirates and Etihad Airways are maximising to repatriate foreign nationals. What plans are in place to secure the use of airspace to facilitate flights for our nationals? What are the Government doing to try to protect British nationals in the region, including Craig and Lindsay Foreman who are detained in Iran? Was that case raised when the murderous Iranian terror regime's representative in London was eventually summoned yesterday? Given Iran's actions, why was he not expelled?

The fallout from the conflict requires Britain to stand up for our country and for our national interests. If ever there was a time for UK leadership, it is now. That leads me to ask, why is the Foreign Secretary not here today? She should be here giving the statement. Instead, we see reports of the Prime Minister being forced by his Cabinet into sitting on the fence—including by Britain's weak and feeble Foreign Secretary. She has failed in her duty

[Priti Patel]

to stand up for Britain's place in the world, failed to work with our allies to promote our national interests in the region, and failed to provide the leadership needed to protect our military personnel, our bases and British nationals.

Where is Britain in the region? What do the provisions of the comprehensive security integration and prosperity agreement with Bahrain mean for the response to this situation? It was meant to build long-term security and stability across the middle east.

Why was Britain so woefully unprepared? Ten days ago, the Foreign Secretary was in Washington claiming to have held successful meetings with her counterpart. What was her response when Iran was discussed? Did she just wave the white flag of surrender and tell her Department not to engage with the United States as it made these plans, and on the action that followed?

Britain's allies are raging against the UK's feebleness. Bahrain, the UAE and Cyprus, as well as the United States, are reported to be angered and disappointed by this Labour Government's shameful weakness to stand up to aggressors. Within hours of the attack on Cyprus, Greece sent two frigates and four F-16 planes, while Britain is still working out when HMS Dragon will depart the UK. The situation is shameful and embarrassing. Never in the history of this great nation have a Government been so feeble at a time when our people and our allies are under assault. This is no time to sit on the sidelines as the Iranian regime and its proxies target everyone.

When will the Government get British nationals home? What will be done to strengthen our defences in the region and work with our allies? What are the Government doing with our allies to neutralise the regime's tools of repression? When will Ministers act over the regime's illegal funding source? The fact is that senior figures in that despotic regime have been parking their wealth and assets in London while repressing their own people. When will Ministers ensure that the UK's financial system and institutions are not facilitating and hosting funds? By the way, I say to Ministers that I have repeatedly asked these questions before.

Finally, when will the Government ban the murderous revolutionary guards and bring forward the emergency legislation that we are all calling for? This is not a time for Britain to be silent. Britain must work with our allies to defend our national security and confront this vile and despotic regime with strength and resolve.

Mr Falconer: I remind the House that there are 300,000 British nationals in the region. As the House will be aware, I have been in many crises that have affected British nationals overseas; the House will know that this is a very significant one. I confirm to the House, and particularly to those on the Opposition Benches given the language they have chosen to use in the past 24 hours—both personally about the Foreign Secretary, as the shadow Foreign Secretary just did, and as the Leader of the Opposition did about “orcs and goons” yesterday—that the Ministers of this country have been in the Foreign Office crisis centre since Saturday. I will not reflect on my time as an official in previous crises, when the same was not said about Foreign Ministers during such times.

I want to be clear for British nationals in the region—

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Where is Yvette?

Mr Falconer: I would be grateful if Members on the Opposition Front Bench could keep their volume slightly down.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I remind Members that we listen with respect in this Chamber, especially when the situation is so serious.

Mr Falconer: I want to be clear to British nationals in the region that the commercial routes that are opening up are by far the most likely and most rapid routes back to the UK. I recognise the terrible uncertainty and anxiety faced by so many British nationals in the region. Given the scale of the disruption to airspace and the global aviation system, this is likely to take some time. We have put on charter flights, and we are working with our commercial partners to ensure that vulnerable British nationals are prioritised.

I say to people at home who are concerned for their loved ones, please do call the Foreign Office hotline. If right hon. and hon. Members are concerned about their constituents, I encourage them either to contact the Foreign Office—we have had officials in the House today to assist people directly—or to be in touch with me, as so many have been already.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Having spent some 10 years on the shadow Front Bench, I know that it is frustrating and that it can be difficult, but there is a responsibility, in my view, to always put the country's interests first and to not use an opportunity for narrow political advantage and play party politics. As for throwing personal abuse across the Dispatch Box at a time like this, I have to say that I am profoundly shocked.

May I move on to my question? Given that the Minister called in the Iranian ambassador to see him, I would be interested to hear what on earth the ambassador had to say and how he excused what Iran is doing at the moment by attacking many countries in the region, some of which have worked night and day to try to find a peaceful way through this.

May I also pass on a message from one of my constituents, who is caught in Muscat at the moment? They moved from the UAE on the basis of Foreign Office advice. They went to the airport in Oman and all they say is this. When they got to the airport, they could see some representatives, particularly of Italy, who were wearing high-vis jackets. There may well be people from Britain there, but they were not as clearly identifiable as some from other countries. I am sure that there is a presence in the airports, but perhaps there could be high-vis jackets or some form of clearer identification, because there will be a lot of people at Muscat airport looking for help.

Mr Falconer: We will take that feedback into account. I confirm that our ambassador to Oman is in the airport as we speak, to ensure the successful departure of the flight. The Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee

is right about the scale of the crisis. We will provide further updates on those questions as rapidly as possible. That is why it is so important that people watching at home register their presence and sign up for our travel advice.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): The illegal war started by Trump and Netanyahu has now engulfed the entire middle east, and Iran's reckless retaliation against our partners in the region is putting British lives at risk. There are 300,000 Britons still in the region, yet only 140,000—less than half—have registered with the Government.

For families in my constituency of Esher and Walton and across the country who have relatives in the region, the uncertainty is agonising. One of my constituents from Walton is stranded in Abu Dhabi and is six months pregnant. Her flight home has been cancelled and her only option is to book a taxi to Oman and then walk up to 4 km in the heat, in the hope of catching a flight. More of my constituents are stranded in Dubai in the Fairmont hotel, which was struck last week. They have registered, as instructed, but have said that the comms are poor and that they cannot get information on how to register for the Government flights.

Will the Minister outline what steps are being taken to encourage more Britons to register their location? Will he also update the House on what contact the Government have had with Lindsay and Craig Foreman, who remain imprisoned in Iran? What steps are being taken to confirm their safety and wellbeing? Even as the Government's immediate focus must be on protecting and repatriating UK citizens in the region, I pay tribute to the officials from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office who are working so hard on this.

We cannot, however, ignore what appear to be catastrophic errors in the Government's readiness for this crisis. The Minister says that this is a consular challenge on the scale of covid, but the Government knew it was coming. Reporting by *The Spectator* and *The Telegraph* overnight suggests that the Government were asked for use of British bases on 11 February. There has been a huge deployment of US assets over the last month, and I also assume that the Government were not oblivious to the USS Gerald R. Ford steaming towards the eastern Mediterranean in late February. With so many signals suggesting that war was potentially imminent, why did the Government not move sooner on preparing repatriation plans for our citizens, or prepare for the defence of our base in Cyprus, with HMS Dragon still sat in Portsmouth?

Mr Falconer: Let me deal with a few of the Liberal Democrat spokesperson's questions in turn. She is right to say that the Foreign Office is much more able to assist those who have registered their presence, and we encourage British nationals to do so in those countries where have called for this. There is also considerable uncertainty in other countries where there is disruption to flights. In countries where we are not calling on British nationals to register their presence, they should still feel free to be in touch with the Foreign Office crisis line. We are providing consular assistance right across the region, and we will continue to do so.

I want to correct, for the record, the precise nature of our advice about the United Arab Emirates and Oman. We are not encouraging British nationals resident in the United Arab Emirates to travel to Oman by land. We are conducting charter flights from Oman. We are not inviting people to put themselves forward for those flights; we are seeking to select people based on vulnerability. We will provide further update on the charters as they become available. British nationals should not move forward to Muscat airport in the hope of a flight. It is clearly a significantly congested area at the moment; they should wait to hear from the Foreign Office.

The Liberal Democrat and Conservative spokespersons both asked me about the Foremans. I confirm that this has been raised with the Iranian regime in the strongest possible terms, including during my summoning yesterday. They are still in Iran, and our thoughts go out to their families, who are currently receiving consular assistance.

In relation to the repatriation flights in general and the suggestion that it would be possible to, in advance, prevent this degree of disruption, I say gently to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson that this is a significant disruption, not just to the region but to the global aviation system. I know that many hon. and right hon. Members will have constituents stuck in places not in the immediately affected area. We hope that the disruption to global aviation can be addressed soon, but clearly, while there remains so much uncertainty about the airspace, there is likely to be a degree of mess and a great number of bugs in the system.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I came here for this statement on consular assistance to raise issues on behalf of my constituents. Clearly, the Conservatives have nothing to say on behalf of people who are really concerned about the situation in the middle east.

During covid, when flights were cancelled, I remember airlines saying nice things, but the reality for our constituents was different. Cathay Pacific stole money from students, despite their having booked through the student travel association acting as its agent, and refused to honour the tickets or pay any compensation. It was absolutely disgraceful. I have constituents who are concerned about getting back now, so may I ask my hon. Friend to keep the pressure on the airlines? They will be as nice as pie to him, but when it comes to our constituents—face to face—they will get away with whatever they can. I urge him to keep the pressure on the airlines to deliver for our constituents.

Mr Falconer: I know that many MPs, myself included, will have constituents in the region who are concerned. We are in regular dialogue with the airlines directly as I described in my statement, and we will continue in that way.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): When the last Conservative Government rather bizarrely chose to appoint David Cameron as Foreign Secretary in the upper House, the then Opposition—quite rightly in my view—complained about the fact that this House could not directly question the Foreign Secretary. I simply say to the Ministers, who are very hard-working, that they should make representations to their boss that she should appear here more often.

[*Sir Julian Lewis*]

The Minister said that we wish to avoid the situation of Iran

“sliding into chaos, exploited by extremists”.

Does he accept that the problem with Iran is that extremists are in control of the country and have been for 47 years? Does its reaction in attacking more than half a dozen neighbouring countries, none of which had attacked it, not show what it would do if it could get its hands on nuclear weapons? Is he satisfied that when our destroyer eventually gets out there, it will have enough munitions to put up a reliable defensive screen for more than a relatively short period of time?

Mr Falconer: British forces have been in action across the region shooting down missiles and drones. They are being resupplied today. I have every confidence in them, including the Royal Navy. I have been clear about our view of the Iranian regime, our utter opposition to its achieving a nuclear weapon and our total condemnation of its attacks on our friends and partners, which are reckless in the extreme. I could set out our position on Iran in greater detail, but I wish to focus more on consular questions today.

On the Foreign Secretary, she was in this House throughout the week, including for Foreign Office orals on Tuesday. We covered these issues in some detail with the Prime Minister yesterday. The Foreign Secretary is currently in the ministerial Cobra discussing these issues. She will, of course, make herself available to the House as much as she possibly can. I hope that colleagues across the House recognise that I speak a great deal in this House because of their interest in these issues, and I will continue to return when the Foreign Secretary is unable to do so.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure the Minister will agree that it is wrong for companies to profit out of this crisis. I have been hearing from constituents in the region who say exorbitant prices are being charged for airfares, which they cannot afford, and for hotels, which they cannot afford to stay in any longer. Can he put pressure on the industry to enable those constituents to come back, particularly as some of their travel insurance has run out?

Mr Falconer: I recognise that there are a very large number of British nationals in a wide range of circumstances. To be clear on our approach, we rightly have to focus on our most vulnerable nationals at the moment. There will be a considerable number of British nationals who are understandably frustrated, anxious and worried about the costs they are accruing, both in the region and the opportunity cost of their not being back in the UK as they expected. We will do everything we can to get people back as swiftly and safely as possible, and I am happy to take up any particular cases.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I appreciate everything the Minister has said and thank him for the information on this, but in his statement, he did not mention the many thousands of British citizens affected in places outwith the Gulf. I have constituents in Sri Lanka who cannot get home, and they have said that they cannot get any consular assistance at the moment because

they are not vulnerable and are not in any danger. For people in other parts of the world who will now incur massive costs because this is an act of war and insurance companies may not cover them, will he tell us how the Government will support them through consular assistance and help them get home?

Mr Falconer: I am sure that the whole House will appreciate that we will continue to discharge our consular responsibilities right across the country, but my Department is understandably focused on the vulnerable and those in harm's way. We will ensure that everybody who is stuck gets home. The hon. Member should encourage her constituents to be in direct contact, and I am sure that the relevant embassies and high commissions will assist where they can. But I am afraid that many of our friends and countrymen across the world who face disruption are likely to do so for some days. The global aviation system is responsive and fast, but given the scale of disruption, it may yet take a little while longer.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): My constituent Lisa is stuck in Dubai. She is three months pregnant. She has her 18-month-old son with her. She has medical needs and is running out of vital medication from the UK. Can I have some reassurance from the Dispatch Box for Lisa's family that she will be prioritised for a flight back home as she is medically vulnerable?

Mr Falconer: If Members in this House or constituents are worried that they are vulnerable, please be in touch with the Foreign Office. Even if there are British nationals in the region who are vulnerable but, for whatever reason, are unable to get on a flight shortly, we will ensure that they get our full support to access the medication or any other assistance they require to continue to stay in the Gulf as safely and securely as possible. We will take up the individual case. I want to encourage colleagues and those listening that if there is any question of vulnerability, contact us directly; do not simply wait because you have registered your presence.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement. I have a constituent who has a 16-year-old daughter in Dubai seeking repatriation to the UK. May I put on the record my thanks to the officials for all the work they are doing? I have heard the Minister today say that the advice now is not to travel by land from Dubai to Oman, but my constituent, as of this morning, is very concerned for the safety of her daughter, who has been told to travel the 400 km to Oman to catch a repatriation flight without consular assistance. It sounds like the advice may have changed recently. Please can the Minister look into this, particularly to ensure that UK minors who are trapped in the region are provided with the right consular support, so that they can transit safely to Oman to catch those repatriation flights?

Mr Falconer: The situation we face is very complex, so let me try to set out the advice on this point in particular because it is so important—indeed, I discussed it with the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), just yesterday. Our advice is advice; British nationals will want to make their own best judgments. In the United Arab Emirates, the continued advice of the UAE is to shelter in place.

That advice is changing very regularly. We are providing updates very regularly. For vulnerable British nationals, where they contact us, we will seek to try to provide them options. In the end, choices will need to be made about whether people wish to move forward to Oman or wait in the United Arab Emirates, which is where the majority of British nationals are currently stuck. I recognise that it is a complicated picture, and that is why I encourage so many to talk directly to my teams so that they can give the best possible advice. Not everybody will follow Foreign Office advice, but we want to give British nationals the full and best facts and advice that we can, so that they can make their best judgments.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for his statement and the advice he has given my constituents and everybody else. I want to raise two issues with him. We asked the FCDO yesterday about vulnerable travellers. It said, "People who identify as vulnerable should highlight this to the FCDO", but it was not able to give guidance on what would be classed as vulnerable. I feel that that would be helpful. What steps has he taken to identify other countries, such as Egypt, where travellers are still going out for holidays and there is a danger that they may get stuck should the situation escalate? What advice would he give them?

Mr Falconer: We are providing travel advice for every country relevant. It is changing quite quickly. I encourage people to look at the specific travel advice. After much painful experience of complex crises, I do not intend to provide a detailed definition of vulnerability. In a crisis of this nature, I would prefer that people speak directly to my officials to explain why they feel vulnerable so that we can give the best possible advice. People should err on the side of caution and call the Foreign Office hotline if they are worried about vulnerability.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): Our thoughts are with those stranded in the region, and we wish them safe passage as soon as possible. I fear that this is the moment when the hollowing out of the UK's consular support service has real-life consequences for many UK nationals. Of course, there is no consular support presence in Tehran at the moment. I know that the Minister is aware of the dire situation faced by Craig and Lindsay Foreman, who are being arbitrarily detained in Evin prison. Before leaving Tehran, did embassy staff make contact with Craig and Lindsay directly to advise them on what to do in the event they were released or managed to escape from Evin prison, and if not, why not?

Mr Falconer: For reasons the House will understand, I will not provide a detailed commentary on direct contact with Craig and Lindsay Foreman. The hon. Member is right that we cannot offer consular assistance in Iran—we have withdrawn our embassy—but I encourage anybody concerned about their family in Iran to be in direct contact with the Foreign Office. This is clearly an extremely sensitive moment. We will take the same approach this year as we did in the conflict last year. We will provide all the help that we can, but we must manage expectations in the absence of our embassy. In the long-standing absence of our ability to provide consular support in Iran, what we can do will be limited,

but people who are worried about family members in Iran should not hesitate to contact us.

Sarah Smith (Hyndburn) (Lab): Like many Members, I have been supporting constituents who are seeking to return to the UK. Although it has not been simple, Janet and Hugh are due to be on one of those extra flights that the Minister has helped to secure with British Airways, which will get them back today. Will the Minister reiterate the importance of any individuals with vulnerabilities using the consular helpline to ensure that they are prioritised for evacuation flights?

Mr Falconer: I am very glad to hear that my hon. Friend's constituents are heading home. As we saw with our own charter flight, for which there was still a great deal of complexity, there will likely be bumps in the road, but we will get everyone home. We will ensure that we attend to their safety and security at every step. Anyone who is worried about their loved ones getting home, or about particular vulnerabilities, should please be in touch in the way that my hon. Friend suggests.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): May I thank the Minister for his statement, and express a certain amount of sympathy? Like him, I ran evacuations under fire, and it is pretty chaotic. He and his officials will inevitably attract some criticism—that is the nature of the beast, as he knows.

At Prime Minister's questions yesterday, the Prime Minister listed a number of pre-emptive measures that he took prior to the conflict starting. It was quite a long list, and included surface-to-air missiles and the radar early warning system. The one obvious gap in that list was sending a ship to the Mediterranean, which is now obviously the first thing that the Government have done as a result of events. Was the decision not to send the ship as part of that pre-emptory package a question of capability or intent? Was it that the Government could not send a ship, or that they did not want to?

Mr Falconer: I am grateful to the hon. and gallant Member for the constructive and reasonable tone of his question—and not just because he has the finest first name in Parliament. Let me provide some additional commentary on HMS Dragon, given that it has been a subject of such interest. As he will know, decisions are based on operational factors. Force protection is at its highest level in the eastern Mediterranean. The decision about HMS Dragon was brought to the Chief of the Defence Staff and Ministers in the light of the increasingly reckless and indiscriminate attacks by Iran across the region, and it was signed off immediately.

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): I thank the Minister for all his work on this ever-changing situation. The Samuels and their two children, who are constituents of mine, are in Dubai at the moment. They are not able to get proper advice from the airlines about the options available to them. Will the Minister elaborate on the work he has been doing with the airlines, where commercial flights are going ahead, and tell us whether they are prioritising based on need and vulnerability?

Mr Falconer: My Department would be very happy to take up the specifics of my hon. Friend's case. Airlines are seeking to manage very complex caseloads, and we

[Mr Falconer]

are grateful for their work with us. The British Government are obviously prioritising our most vulnerable nationals, and we are encouraging commercial partners to do the same.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I thank the Minister, Government officials and all our casework teams dealing with our constituents on this matter. Many of my constituents have been affected, and I too have encouraged them to register for the scheme. I am particularly concerned about vulnerable people with health conditions. I understand that they will be prioritised for repatriation flights. One of my constituents, who hopes to be on a flight tomorrow morning, has a heart condition and will run out of medication at some point. The Minister said that the Government hope to get medication into those countries. Will he elaborate on that to give reassurance to constituents like mine, who are understandably concerned about the management of their health conditions while this situation continues?

Mr Falconer: I understand that British nationals abroad with medical conditions will be worried about whether they can get access to the medicines that they require. The vast majority of British nationals are in the United Arab Emirates, where there are good supplies of all reasonable medicines that people would want access to. However, those with particular concerns should get in touch with my officials. We will work to ensure that British nationals who need medicine but cannot get access to it on their own are supported. Some of my officials have helped to take British nationals to pharmacies, for example.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and for all the work that he and the Government are doing to help UK citizens get home if they wish to. One of my constituents is in Dubai with friends. She is a type 1 diabetic but is running out of insulin and is anxious to return home. Can he offer any guidance on whether she might be prioritised for a flight home, and on what medical support she can access in the interim?

Will the Minister also offer advice to other constituents of mine, including Krystal Whyment, who are unable to leave Dubai because flights have been cancelled on more than one occasion? They are finding it difficult to access support when they contact the UK consulate in Dubai, because of the heavy workload that the consulate is clearly experiencing.

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for the care that he shows his constituents. I think I covered the medical question in my previous answer. Of course, as he generously acknowledged, the teams on the ground are under considerable pressure. I recognise that British nationals will be frustrated when there are delays in getting through to our team, but I want to reassure people that our hotline is open 24/7, and they will speak to Foreign Office staff when they get through. I am keeping a close eye on the waiting times for people to get through. I know that this will not all be smooth sailing, and that we will encounter all manner of issues

and glitches, but we will do everything we can to minimise them and work as quickly as we can to get everybody home safely.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): A statement on consular assistance is no time for party political attacks. That does a disservice to hard-working officials such as Sarah Taylor, who has been doing amazing work, and it does a disservice to our constituents who are stuck abroad.

I am pleased to report to the Minister that Cameron, the individual I mentioned to the Prime Minister in the Chamber earlier this week, who was stuck in a hospital in Dubai, is now back home safe in London. However, I want to raise the plight of another constituent, Donna, who I spoke to the Minister about yesterday. Donna has attempted to board six flights from the United Arab Emirates back to London, but each has been cancelled. She has a number of health conditions and has run out of medication. She cannot get that medication or its equivalent in the United Arab Emirates. What can the Minister do to support us, first, to get an alternative to the medication that she needs, and, secondly, to get Donna back home to Eastbourne safely?

Mr Falconer: I thank the hon. Member for his tone and the welcome news that Cameron is home safely. I know he has been in touch directly with our excellent director for consular affairs, who will be red in the face at being in *Hansard* unexpectedly. We will do everything we can to make sure that Donna gets the assistance she needs.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): As someone with family who have been living in the UAE for a number of years, I know how worrying it is for many families both here and there, so I thank the Minister for his work and that of his officials in providing consular assistance. I want to raise the case of a constituent who has been in touch. He was on his way to transit in Kuwait and found that Kuwait Airways is no longer paying for his accommodation and is seemingly providing very little help. What more could he be doing, and what more could I be doing to support him? What other support is available to him? What work are we doing with the commercial airlines to ensure they are providing the right support to people like my constituent?

Mr Falconer: We are working directly with the airlines. I am sure my hon. Friend is putting these points to my officials, and we will follow up.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers, and I also thank his Department. I have some constituents who work for Bombardier and were in Malaysia. They were returning home to Northern Ireland via the middle east but found themselves restricted by the events taking place there and unable to travel. They got home last night, so I want to put on record my thanks to the Minister and his Department.

Some 138,000 British people have registered their presence in the middle east. Getting them home is one thing, but making sure they are safe until then is another. What is being done to make sure they are safe? Families are worried sick, and they want to know that their loved ones are safe.

Mr Falconer: I thank the hon. Member for his important question. I am conscious that there is a slightly different process for those from Northern Ireland, depending on whether they have a British passport on them, for signing up to “register your presence”. We have clarified the process. If there are any questions, please do refer them to the Foreign Office.

The hon. Member is right to talk about the risks in the region. We are providing updated travel advice to ensure that British nationals are aware, but of course we are taking concrete actions, too. I can confirm to the House that we have been actively disrupting threats over the last few days. That includes the RAF Typhoon squadron jointly with Qatar shooting down drones over Qatar, RAF F-35B Lightnings shooting down uncrewed aerial systems over Jordan, and British counter-uncrewed aerial systems teams neutralising drones in Iraqi airspace heading towards coalition forces. Britain will take active action to defend our people, our interests and, of course, our friends and partners in the region.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I associate myself with the Minister’s condolences to the families of those who have been killed, and I thank him for his statement, for his tone and for summoning the Iranian ambassador yesterday, who I hope was left in no doubt about both our values and our resolve. I acknowledge the work to get those stuck in the middle east home, but my constituent and his family from Newcastle-under-Lyme are stuck because their flights through the middle east have been cancelled twice. The next available flight, they were told this morning, is on 24 March. Their travel agent has told the family that they must pay for their accommodation between today and 24 March, at a cost of about £1,000 a night for almost three weeks, which is £20,000 or so. Notwithstanding what the Minister has said today, may I urge him to go further and much, much faster in ensuring that airlines and agents do not leave people in the lurch, do not take advantage and do not let them down?

Mr Falconer: I can confirm that I left the Iranian ambassador in no doubt about the British position and resolve. In relation to my hon. Friend’s constituents, please be in touch. It sounds like they are not in the

region and are facing a particularly expensive set of hotel bills. It would be easier for me if I had a little bit more detail, following a conversation with officials.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. May I invite him to join me in paying tribute to the pilots and other service personnel based at RAF Marham in my constituency? It was the F-35s based there that were engaged in action this week to protect British citizens and support our allies, and I pay tribute to their skills, expertise and dedication.

Mr Falconer: I, of course, join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to RAF Marham. I also have to mention RAF Waddington, a vital airbase in my constituency, which is providing a considerable contribution. I know the whole House will be thinking of our armed forces as they keep our people, our interests and our allies protected in these tense days.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): My thoughts are with British citizens in the Gulf; as someone who has lived and worked in that region, I can only imagine how concerned they must be. Those on the Opposition Front Bench yesterday and today have used careless, aggressive and disrespectful language in this Chamber, and I imagine they are doing so in order to wrap themselves in the cloak of national security patriotism. Does my hon. Friend agree that this use of language actually undermines national security, because it suggests that this House is divided on such an important issue? I would like to pay tribute to his diplomats, our incredibly brave armed forces and other civil servants in this country who are dealing with this crisis. As they deal with it, they would benefit, I think, from a united House of Commons.

Mr Falconer: I agree very much with the tone of my hon. Friend’s question. When I look behind me, I do not see “orcs and goons”—I see hon. Friends concerned about their constituents, and I know the same is true across all these Benches.

Energy Markets

12.46 pm

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): With permission, I will make a statement about the situation in energy markets in the light of the unfolding conflict in Iran and the middle east. My thoughts are with the British citizens and those across the world affected by the events of recent days, and I thank members of our armed forces serving in the region and elsewhere.

Let me update the House on the situation in global oil and gas markets and the impact on the UK. In the days since the conflict began, we have seen Iran target energy production and export infrastructure across the Gulf. Traffic in the strait of Hormuz, through which around 20% of global oil and liquefied natural gas is shipped, has declined very significantly, and the Iranian regime has issued reckless and unjustified threats to all ships using it. LNG production has also been halted in Qatar, following unjustified and indiscriminate Iranian attacks at the start of the week.

The UK benefits from strong and diverse energy supplies, including our own North sea production, pipelines with Norway, interconnectors with continental Europe and three LNG terminals. While Qatar is a major supplier of LNG globally, last year it provided the UK with 1% of our gas supply. I have been in touch with National Gas and the National Energy System Operator, which are confident about our security of supply. On oil, we hold substantial emergency and commercial stocks and stand ready to work with the International Energy Agency to support the stability of oil markets if needed. As when Russia invaded Ukraine, though, we will be exposed to price competition in international oil and gas markets, which is pushing up wholesale prices as other countries seek to replace lost supplies from the region. That reflects our position, regardless of our domestic production, as a price taker not a price maker in these markets, leaving us exposed to their volatility, no matter where the fossil fuels come from.

The Government continue to monitor the situation closely and work with our international partners. In recent days I have had multiple conversations with the executive director of the IEA, as well as with my counterparts in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the EU and our major UK oil and gas producers. I will be having further calls with our international allies and partners over the coming days. This is a fast-moving situation, and we continue to work with our allies to seek to minimise the impact of disruption to markets and support the safe passage of oil and gas across the world.

I know that families and businesses across the country will see these global events and be concerned about the impact on their energy bills and the cost of living. It is important to say that the energy price cap will provide protection for households until the start of July, regardless of developments in the middle east. Last week, Ofgem confirmed that as a result of the Chancellor's decisions in the Budget, the price cap will fall by 7%, or £117 annually, for the period covering April to June. The price cap for that period is fixed and will not change. That is a direct result of decisions in the Budget by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor to raise taxes on the wealthiest, and to cut bills for families across Britain. In addition,

around 6 million families are benefiting from our expansion of the £150 warm home discount, and we are delivering the biggest investment in home upgrades in British history through our warm homes plan, to cut bills and shield families from these kinds of fossil fuel shocks.

On business and industry, we are taking action to expand the British industry supercharger from April to reduce costs for the most energy-intensive businesses, and a significant proportion of businesses are on fixed-term contracts that shield them from market volatility for the contract duration. However, we recognise that at the point of contracting, businesses are exposed to international fossil fuel markets, and clearly, for both businesses and consumers, much will depend on the length of this crisis.

On Tuesday in her spring statement, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor reaffirmed her commitment to prioritise families and businesses, whatever turbulence we see around the world. She showed her determination to act on bills in the Budget last year, and as we continue to monitor the effects of these events, the House and country should be in no doubt that the Prime Minister's No. 1 priority is to tackle the cost of living crisis that affects families across Britain. However long this crisis lasts, we must learn the right long-term lessons. The events of recent days are yet another reminder that the only route to energy security and sovereignty for the UK is to get off our dependence on fossil fuel markets, whose prices we do not control, and on to clean home-grown power that we do control.

Only several weeks ago, some people were suggesting that we should gamble on low fossil fuel prices and cancel the allocation round 7 renewables auction. When I made my statement on that auction, I warned the House that people can have incredibly short memories, given that we are just four years on from Russia's invasion of Ukraine. I warned at the time that it was a foolish and dangerous gamble to bet on geopolitical stability during greater geopolitical instability than at any time for generations. I warned that the Opposition had failed to learn lessons from the Ukraine crisis, which caused the worst cost of living crisis in memory, and that a dogma of opposing clean energy would damage this country, and risk families and businesses being left to pick up the bill. The events of recent days have unfortunately shown why that would be such a dangerous and reckless strategy, and we will continue to reject it. Instead, our AR7 renewables auction alone will supply enough home-grown, secure, clean power for the equivalent of 16 million homes. That is power we will not have to source from the international gas market, power that will not be at the mercy of international events, and power over which we, not fossil fuel markets, have control.

Of course, North sea production continues to play an important and valuable role in our energy system, but as we learn the right lessons from this crisis, this Government will not succumb to the false arguments peddled by some. It is a maturing basin and accounts for less than 0.7% of global oil and gas production. New exploration licences are completely marginal to that basin, and would make no difference to prices set by international markets and paid by UK billpayers.

"More UK production wouldn't reduce the global price of gas"—

those are not my words, but those of the former Energy Minister, Greg Hands in 2022, in midst of the last energy crisis. Indeed, the shadow Energy Secretary said in 2023 that new licences

“wouldn’t necessarily bring energy bills down”.

This Government have taken the decision to keep existing fields open for their lifetime, including through transitional energy certificates in our North sea future plan, as called for and welcomed by industry. They have also decided not to issue new licences to explore new fields, which the science tells us is the right thing to do, because this Government will not ignore the biggest long-term threat multiplier to our security and stability that we face: the climate crisis.

As the Prime Minister said yesterday, for Labour Members the lesson of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and the lesson of recent days, is that our mission is the only route to greater energy independence for Britain, and we will double down on it. Every solar panel we install, every wind turbine we put up, and every nuclear power station we build makes us more secure as a country, and protects families and businesses from those kinds of energy shocks.

This Government have learned the lessons of the geopolitical instability we have seen and continue to see. In an unstable world, we will keep driving for energy sovereignty and abundance with clean home-grown power. We will not gamble with the British people’s money at the fossil fuel casino, and ignore the lessons of the past. We have shown a determination to act to help families, and we will continue to do so. We will work with our allies and partners to defend our national interest, and seek to bring this conflict to an end for the benefit of citizens at home and the stability of the world, and I commend this statement to the House.

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

12.54 pm

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for advanced sight of his statement. Events in the middle east this past week have shown why it is so vital that the Government do all they can to ensure that UK businesses and households have a secure, reliable supply of dispatchable energy—a supply we can rely on. Affordable energy is vital, but just as important is security of supply. There was nothing new in the Secretary of State’s statement—no actions, just notes of some meetings—but there were and are actions that he can take, and he could take them now for both supplies and for bills.

No matter how much the green lobby or the Secretary of State wish that the UK could end its reliance on oil and gas overnight, we cannot. Some 40% of the UK’s energy comes from gas, which is the UK’s single biggest energy source, and 24 million UK homes, and half a million businesses, are connected to the gas grid. Currently, 43% of gas used in the UK is produced in our North sea basin, which is a vital energy source. Every molecule of gas produced by the UK in the North sea is piped on to our shores and into our grid. The oil produced comes onshore either here or in Europe to be refined. It does not, and cannot, get caught in the strait of Hormuz or elsewhere. It is a secure supply of oil for the UK.

Our North sea oil and gas sector has been, is, and should remain vital for our national security and be a national security resource for many years, yet it is a resource that the Government, and this Secretary of State, are actively trying to shut down. The GMB Scotland secretary has called his plans “delusional”, and mean that we are facing

“the most destructive industrial calamity in our nation’s history—a disaster risking untold jobs, communities, even higher bills, and our energy security”.

The North sea oil and gas industry and its workforce must be protected. The Secretary of State knows that that workforce, and those supply chains will, if still here, deliver the roll-out of technologies such as wind and nuclear in the future. The Secretary of State must overturn his ban on new oil and gas licences—will he? He must immediately give confidence to the industry that it has a future in the North sea by finally granting Jackdaw and Rosebank. What is taking so long? To kick-start investment, stem the accelerating fall in production, and secure the skilled workforce and supply chains, he must, with the Treasury, end the energy profits levy now.

Nuclear is the UK’s route to energy security. Nuclear works in the winter, can run 24/7, and latest prices worldwide show that it can also be much cheaper. As the Secretary of State knows, our existing plants are nearing end of life, and the Government are stalling on actions to replace or renew new gigawatt-scale sites. They have ruled out large-scale nuclear at Wylfa, and dropped the previous Conservative Government’s 24 GW target. In light of current events, does the Secretary of State accept that not granting a new gigawatt-scale plant at Wylfa—arguably the best site in the country for a large-scale plant—was a huge missed opportunity? We are still waiting for the Government to accept recommendations in the Fingleton review, which will make nuclear cheaper and easier to build. When will the Secretary of State do so, and will he do so in full?

I will touch briefly on the luddite approach to energy from the Scottish National party in Scotland. SNP Members try to talk a good game and sound as if they support energy workers, energy generation and energy investment, but that is an illusion. They have a ban on new nuclear, and still a presumption against new oil and gas. They are happy to coat the countryside with pylons, turbines and batteries, but they have no plan whatsoever for when the wind does not blow.

Last year the Secretary of State signed a secret energy deal with China. He does not like it to be called a secret, but what other word can there be when he refused to publish details month after month, and only published them after sustained pressure from my right hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State? It is no surprise that he wanted to keep it a secret. It is agreeing to co-operate with China—a known threat—on batteries, cables, inverters, and turbines, effectively giving a nation that is known to have interfered in numerous sovereign states, and that has placed kill switches in energy infrastructure that it has exported, access to our energy grid. That is at best foolish, and at worst reckless. Whatever we call it, it is another threat to our energy security.

Businesses are struggling with sky-high energy prices, and households are bracing themselves for energy bills that may rise significantly this year. The Conservatives’

[*Harriet Cross*]

clean power plan would reduce bills by 20%. The Secretary of State could take action today, so will he adopt our cheap power plan?

Ed Miliband: I will answer the hon. Lady's questions in a moment, but first I say to her that the biggest question for this House and for the country is: do we learn the lessons of these crises? Half the recessions that have happened since the 1970s have been caused by fossil-fuel price spikes. We all face a choice: we can either learn the lessons of those crises and drive towards clean, home-grown power—to be fair, at some points, that used to be the policy of the last Conservative Government—or we can pretend that those lessons do not exist, and we can keep repeating the same mistake. I fear that since the general election, the Conservatives, having already moved halfway from learning that important lesson, have moved away from it fully.

That takes me to the answers to the hon. Lady's questions. On nuclear, we are undertaking the biggest nuclear building programme for half a century. We are doing all the things the last Government promised and never delivered. Where were the Conservatives on Sizewell C? They said that they would have agreement on it in the last Parliament, but they did not; we are doing it. Where were they with small modular reactors? We are actually putting them in place. Yes, we will publish the details of the Fingleton review shortly, and it will be an important step forward in the regulation of our industry that the Conservatives never took.

The hon. Lady said that the North sea is an incredibly “important” resource, which is exactly what I said in my statement. We listened to the industry and took a pragmatic approach on tie-back to existing fields, which was welcomed by the industry, to keep our manifesto commitment of keeping existing oil and gas fields open for their lifetime. I want to pause on the point that she raised about new exploration licences. The truth is, as everybody knows, new exploration licences, particularly in the light of tie-backs, will make no difference to production. It is important to remember that on average it is 10 years from exploration to production.

Last year, an important report by the National Energy System Operator on the security of gas supply said that the biggest single thing that we could do for security of supply is drive towards a clean energy transition. The more we fail to do that, the more we are exposed, given that the North sea is a declining basin that has seen production fall by 75% in last 25 years, and that 70,000 jobs were lost under the Conservatives.

On the hon. Lady's point about the windfall tax, the Chancellor says that she wants the windfall tax to end, but obviously she has to look at the current circumstances. I notice that the Conservatives have now disavowed their decision to introduce the windfall tax. The windfall tax has raised £12 billion since 2022 because of supernormal profits—the money that was going from our constituents into the pockets of oil and gas companies. It is all very easy to say, “We shouldn't have done the windfall tax,” but the Conservatives did introduce it, and I think it was the right thing to do. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor listens closely to the industry, and was talking to representatives from the industry about these issues yesterday, but it is important to recognise those other issues.

On the environmental impact assessment process, we will follow the right process because we want to ensure that what we do is legally watertight and not subject to endless judicial review, and that is what the industry wants.

To return to my original point—

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): What about China?

Ed Miliband: Last week, I said that what the Conservatives were saying about the memo was a whacky internet conspiracy theory, and they said, “No, it isn't, so why don't you publish it?”, so I did, and now they have nothing say. Not only did we publish our memo, but I am glad to say that we published the Conservative memo from 2015. What did that show? That we were going to get the Chinese to build nuclear power stations for us, for goodness' sake. I urge all Members to look at the facts and the evidence, and to learn the right lessons.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Chair of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Yesterday, the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee looked at the facts and the evidence: Ofgem and NESO told us that the price cap will be in place until June as a short-term protection; that clean power 2030 is indeed the best way to avoid future exposure to the sorts of risks that we are now experiencing; that energy costs as a share of GDP will fall from their current 10% to between 5% and 6% by 2050, according to Government plans; and that there is no prospect of bringing down prices by undertaking activity in the North sea. What plans does the Secretary of State have for short-term support for bill payers? We heard evidence about the reformed national pricing consultation that is under way. May I encourage him to bring that forward, so that bill payers can benefit from the availability of low-demand cheap electricity as soon as possible, as an immediate response to this crisis?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend speaks wisely on these issues. I agree with what he said about how we get energy security and the right thing to do. On the question of bill payers, across Government and across the House, we are incredibly alive to and vigilant about the potential impact of the crisis. I believe there is cross-party support for the price cap, which I think is very important. In a world without the price cap, we would see much more immediate effects. That does not mean that everyone is protected, but the vast majority of domestic consumers are protected by the price cap.

My hon. Friend asked about short-term action, including through RNP. As he would imagine, across my Department, there is intensive work under way, looking at all the options that we have. As the regulator said to the Committee yesterday, much of this will depend on how long the crisis lasts, but the Chancellor and the Prime Minister have both shown their willingness and determination to act on bills, and I am sure that will remain.

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

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): The conflict in the middle east reminds us again how dangerously exposed the UK is to volatile global fossil fuel markets.

Forecasts by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation have shown that, just as happened after Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine, energy bills could go up dramatically, placing further pressure on families and businesses that are struggling, while energy companies make profits. The leader of the Liberal Democrats, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), asked the Prime Minister yesterday to give a cast-iron guarantee that he would not let energy bills rise by £500 this year, but he did not. Will the Secretary of State give that guarantee?

Why are we so exposed? Because of our heavy reliance on gas, limited storage capacity, dependence on imports, and falling domestic liquefied natural gas inventories. As recently as January, the Conservatives were arguing in favour of continued reliance on gas, due to the price falling at that time, but it has taken less than two months for them to be proven wrong. Meanwhile, given the instability in European energy markets caused by the ongoing conflicts, I am glad to hear that the Secretary of State has engaged with energy counterparts in the EU. I would like to hear more details of their analysis of the potential impact on supply, prices and regional energy security.

Ed Miliband: I agree with the hon. Lady on her fundamental point about why we are exposed. Cost of living support is obviously a matter for the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, but I reiterate to her that the Chancellor showed a willingness to act on these issues in the Budget because she recognised the pressures that families are facing, and that the cost of living crisis is by far the biggest issue facing our country. At Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister again reiterated that we are carefully monitoring the situation. The Government have shown their willingness to intervene, and if necessary, we will intervene again.

On the wider points that the hon. Lady makes, the most important thing to emphasise is that we have to go back to the fundamentals. That means driving forward with clean power and the insulation of homes. Our European counterparts, whom she asked about, face similar challenges. Through the International Energy Agency, we are all engaged on some of the issues around oil stocks that I raised in my statement. She is absolutely right that co-operation with our European colleagues is particularly vital at this time.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his very clear and measured statement. May I ask him about two points? First, if we see rises in bills in forthcoming months, can we ensure that the blame is placed firmly where it should be—on the actions of the Iranian Government in attacking and threatening the strait of Hormuz?

Secondly, in the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee meeting yesterday, we heard from the chief executive of Ofgem that a prolonged period of closure of the strait of Hormuz would create an upward pressure on prices. He indicated during that evidence session that the market anticipated that it could manage a period of roughly two weeks. As the conflict continues to develop, does the Secretary of State have any sense of what might be meant by a "prolonged period of time" that would create upward pressure? Will he ensure that the Committee and the House are kept informed?

Ed Miliband: I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent questions. On the first point, he is absolutely right. I spoke to my counterpart, the Qatari Energy Minister, and it was the attacks on Qatar's LNG terminals, and understandable fears for their workforce as a result of indiscriminate Iranian attacks, that led him to make his decisions. Iranian threats to the strait of Hormuz are preventing the passage of shipping, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right to emphasise that point.

I will not speculate on my hon. Friend's point about how long the conflict will last, but he is right to say that the longer the conflict goes on, the more impact there will be on bill payers and our economy. That is why it is in all our interests for this conflict to come to an end as soon as possible. On his other point, I undertake to keep the House and the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee informed.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Representing the constituency of Brigg and Immingham as I do, I recognise that the renewable energy sector is attracting investment and jobs into the area. However, I have thousands of people who work in energy-intensive industries, and their jobs are increasingly at risk. As with everything, compromise and balance are important. May I urge the Secretary of State to recognise that the energy costs for industry are crippling many businesses? We must do something to address that.

Ed Miliband: I absolutely recognise the challenges that many businesses faced even before the crisis. It is important to say that even before the crisis began, fossil fuel prices were still 40% higher than before Russia invaded Ukraine, and businesses were facing the impacts of that.

We are taking action this April on the supercharger, but that is for only 500 or so of the most energy-intensive businesses. We are also taking action next April on the British industrial competitiveness scheme, which is for 7,000 businesses, but I recognise the point that the hon. Gentleman makes. Just as we are looking across Government at the situation that households face, and working on that, we are looking at the impact on businesses; indeed, I was talking to my colleague the Secretary of State for Business and Trade yesterday.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to expose the utter folly of responding to the situation that faces us by saying, "We need to stop with renewables and invest more in oil and gas." It would be utter madness to learn that lesson. When we had the huge price spike as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the fact that oil and gas was coming from the UK made no difference to the amount that our consumers paid, because it was all on the global market.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that the marginal pricing system, which was set up at a time when 80% or 90% of energy was being generated by fossil fuels, is far less robust at a time when the figure for gas is down to 40% and shrinking the entire time, and more than 50% of our energy comes from renewable sources? Because renewables are cheaper, should we not look to benefit from that, rather than having a system that allows gas to set the price, even if it accounts for only 1% of our energy?

Ed Miliband: I agree with the first part of my hon. Friend's question, so I will take the last part on marginal pricing, as that is the challenge, and be as brief as I can. I completely understand the logic of his question. One of the benefits of a clean power system is that gas will set the price much less of the time. One of the benefits of moving from the renewables obligation to contracts for difference is that it gives us a fixed price that is not subject to the marginal price of gas. I am sympathetic to the principle that my hon. Friend espouses, but the truth is that there are significant obstacles to getting to what he wants to see in a timely way and a way that is better for bill payers. Among all the other things, my Department continues to look at that.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Energy Security and Net Zero Committee is running an inquiry into the costs of energy, as we have already heard from its Chair. With all due respect, I cannot understand how the Conservative Opposition can with a straight face deplore the cost of energy for bill payers while at the same time advocate prolonging our dependency on oil and gas. That is precisely what keeps our energy bills high.

Let me come back to our inquiry. We heard from one of the witnesses from E3G that there could be costs of up to £500 per household in hidden profits due to the untransparent network charges put on to energy bills. Will the Government ensure that bill payers are given a full picture of the breakdown of profits across the energy sector?

Ed Miliband: I thank the hon. Lady for the point that she makes. It is worth saying that Lord Browne of Madingley, formerly of BP, was on the radio yesterday making precisely the same point that she and I have made. This is a man who used to run one of the world's largest oil and gas companies, and he said that the lesson of this crisis is that we have to get on to clean power.

On the hon. Lady's point about networks, it is important to be transparent about that. It is also important to bear down on those costs, and I obviously discuss that a lot with the regulator.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My right hon. Friend talks about the lessons learned. Despite my youthful good looks, I recall the 1979 Iranian revolution—the last Iranian revolution—which led to a fuel crisis globally. The importance of what we are doing is underlined by the need for the energy transition and the need to improve our domestic energy resilience. That is why we need to see more renewables and to roll out Rolls-Royce small modular reactors urgently and take a lead globally on that.

My right hon. Friend talks about household support. What does he think President Trump was thinking about the impact that this situation would have on businesses and the humble motorist?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend was obviously a precocious five-year-old in 1979, with a great knowledge of and interest in politics. I will not speculate on the last part of his question, but what he said about the indiscriminate Iranian attacks is an important point to underline. The fundamental point he makes about driving forward with renewables, nuclear and all the things that get us off the markets is surely the lesson that we must all learn from this crisis.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his update. I echo the calls for support for business and keeping an eye on the impact of this crisis on business. For areas like mine in North Yorkshire, off-grid gas and oil customers do not have the same protection as many other energy customers. Will he and his team focus have regard to those customers as this crisis evolves?

Ed Miliband: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his points about business and particularly about heating oil. It is a really important point, because people who are using heating oil are exposed to what is happening in the market. Obviously, it depends on when they restock their heating oil and, as I have said a number of times, how long the crisis continues, but he is right to raise that as an area we need to look at.

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): To follow on from that exact question, I, too, represent a very rural constituency, and there will be constituencies up and down the United Kingdom, particularly in Northern Ireland, that are heavily reliant on heating oil as our source of energy. Will the Secretary of State say what action will be taken in the medium and short term to take account of the price shocks? I have already had the chair of the parish council in Thurlton get in touch, along with many other constituents who are very worried about this price shock.

Ed Miliband: Obviously, we are in the first few days of this crisis, but the best thing I can say to my hon. Friend and hon. Members in all parts of the House who are concerned about this issue, and totally understandably so, is that we are very much aware of where the exposure is. The price cap is a guarantee, and I chose my words carefully when I said earlier that, for the vast majority of people, the price cap provides a guarantee for domestic consumers, bearing in mind that those using heating oil are more exposed. We will look at that issue. To go back to the wider point that I made, both the Chancellor and the Prime Minister have shown a determination to act on the cost of living crisis. Obviously, much of this depends on how long the crisis goes on, but the point is well taken.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I appreciate what the Minister has just said about heating oil, because 55% of households in Dwyfor Meirionnydd are off the gas grid. Many rely on alternative heating fuels, and they are not protected by the energy price cap. We also pay the highest standing charges of any region in the United Kingdom and are exposed to global market shocks, in the sense that deliveries can be late and prices are passed straight on. In the energy crisis triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, off-grid households had to wait months longer for any support, but they did get a one-off alternative fuel payment of £200. Will the Secretary of State consider something similar to the alternative fuel payment at this time?

Ed Miliband: I will not speculate on that, but one of the important things that I have emphasised in all the calls I have had and the discussions in my Department is that we must learn the lessons from what was done right in the previous Government's response to the Russia-Ukraine crisis and also from where there were

challenges. That is one of the emphases I have placed on my conversations with our civil servants, businesses and, indeed, international partners. I have heard what the right hon. Lady has said on this issue and will definitely bear it in mind.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): It is perfectly reasonable for Opposition parties to espouse the policy of reopening oil and gas fields; it is just the wrong policy, and there is no clearer example of that than a moment like this. The only way that we can generate energy independence is by accelerating our transition to renewable energy. With that in mind, I know that the Secretary of State is very much focused on onshore wind, offshore wind and solar, but will he think again about the Department's policy on geothermal energy? Our first geothermal energy plant has just opened in Cornwall, and we have vast deposits of geothermal energy, which could be a really useful addition to the renewable energy mix.

Ed Miliband: First, let me celebrate the opening of the plant. Indeed, I sent a video celebrating it—I am sorry I could not be there, but I congratulated my hon. Friend on his brilliant advocacy. I accept the point he makes that we have to look at all the technologies at our disposal. One of the reasons I am very glad that Lord Whitehead has joined our Department is that, as my hon. Friend will know, he has a specific brief covering alternative technologies. My view is, if it can bring down bills and help to get us to cleaner power, we should absolutely go for it.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I fully accept the argument that energy independence will be enhanced by renewable energy and in particular by nuclear energy, but everyone seems to accept that we will continue to have some dependence on fossil fuels for a considerable period of time. Although it is discouraging to hear that no matter how much we extract from the North sea, it will not lower prices—that does sound rather a strange conclusion, but I am willing to accept that it is true—the fact is that if we are going to need such supplies for a considerable period of time, they may be cut off from other sources. Therefore, security of supply is an important element of the mix. Is that not obvious?

Ed Miliband: That is why we said in our manifesto that we would keep existing oil and gas fields open for their lifetime. Indeed, we did not just say it; we had a good dialogue with the industry, in which it said that one thing that would make existing oil and gas fields competitive was tiebacks to fields with new production. We listened and we accepted that.

I have great respect for the right hon. Gentleman; I think the issue he is adverting to is exploration licences, because the North sea is a declining basin. Obviously, there are tax matters in this regard, which are for the Chancellor, but all the evidence is that exploration licences are entirely marginal to production, and the average time from exploration to production is 10 years, as I said earlier. On the 10-year view, the most important thing we can do for our energy security by far—by many multiples—is to drive towards clean power, which I think he supports and which is the centrepiece of our strategy.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Before the next question, may I remind Members to keep their questions, and perhaps also the answers, short?

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): I appreciate the Secretary of State's incredibly important update to the House, especially on energy security. There have been reports in the media of PetroChina being barred from all exports of diesel and gasoline by the Chinese Government. With PetroChina's co-ownership of the Grangemouth import terminal, and following its role in the closure of Scotland's only oil refinery last year, what assurances can the Secretary of State provide my constituents on the security of imported supply coming through Grangemouth?

Ed Miliband: We use negligible amounts of fuel from China, and I can absolutely reassure my hon. Friend, and indeed his constituents, on security of supply.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): On nuclear, I note that, had small modular reactors gone to Oldbury, Wylfa would still be available for other options to reduce our fossil fuel dependence. I want to ask about small businesses. On top of a rising tax burden, the fear of further energy spikes causes small businesses in my constituency, particularly energy-intensive ones such as hospitality and manufacturing, to fear for their survival. Will the Secretary of State introduce new measures to support them?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Lady raises an important issue. Indeed, the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Chris McDonald)—who has briefly left the Chamber—is also a Minister at the Department for Business and Trade and has a particular focus on how we can help small businesses to get better deals. Better regulation of the deals they get is one area where Ofgem will have a role in what was previously an un-regulated or under-regulated market. On the wider point about the impact of the crisis on small businesses, I reiterate to the hon. Lady, by way of reassurance, what I have said to other hon. Members. The Government are absolutely focused on the impact of the crisis on households and indeed businesses, and we will not hesitate to act.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for the Government's laser focus on renewable energy in England and Wales. Does he agree that this should deliver basically a triple whammy for us? We will not be at the mercy of foreign states for our energy, bills for consumers will go down and, finally, we will reduce the impact of the biggest threat to our planet, which is climate change.

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is so right. I talk to partners around the world, including in Europe, which the Liberal Democrats asked about, and elsewhere, and it is interesting that so many other countries now take this approach. The case for renewables was always a climate case, but for so many it is now as much an energy security case, because they are in a similar place to us: they are price takers, not price makers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. As soon as the first missiles were launched over Iran, those working in the energy sector were already warning that prices would escalate. The public can little afford the price gouging that took place when Russia invaded Ukraine, so what steps will the Secretary of State take to ensure that any rise is absolutely necessary and will not result in greater profits for certain people and companies? What consideration will be given to implementing energy schemes to help working families meet the cost?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Gentleman speaks with great eloquence on these issues on behalf of his constituents and others. He is absolutely right to say that, in a situation like this, everyone has a responsibility. The Government have a responsibility, and private companies have a responsibility too—he is right to make them aware of that. On the wider question about the impact on families, it is important that the Government are vigilant about the steps we can take to help people.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): One of the first lessons from the Russia-Ukraine war, and now from the war in the middle east, is that oil refineries and fossil fuel infrastructure are primary targets and that energy prices are now part of war strategy. Our race to renewables is important not just here in the UK, but around the world. The price of Urals crude has nearly reached the price of other crude oils, and we need to ensure that other countries are not reliant on Russian oil being delivered by the shadow fleet. Is the Secretary of State working with other countries to ensure that they are taking the same path towards the renewable transformation that we are taking?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend speaks with great eloquence on these issues, and he is absolutely right. As I said earlier, it is striking that so many countries now talk about this as an energy security issue. For the 80-plus countries that supported the road map for the transition away from fossil fuels at COP30, it was as much about energy security, about their own situation, about bills and about their fear of exposure as it was about the long-term threat that we face from the climate crisis, as crucial as that is.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, which I read and listened to very closely. Is it fair to summarise the Secretary of State's statement by saying that he is not going to do anything differently as a result of the conflict in Iran? I listened to and read the statement very closely, and it does not appear to me that we are going to change anything. It was more of a series of things that we are doing already.

Ed Miliband: No, I do not think that is right at all. The truth about these crises is that it is incredibly important that the Government look at everything we can do, particularly to help address the impact on families and businesses, as I said a number of times in my statement. I reassure the hon. Gentleman and the House that this Government have the right strategy on energy policy. The lesson we all need to learn is that exposure to fossil fuel markets is dangerous for the

country, and the best thing we can do is speed up our drive to renewables and, indeed, to nuclear. The more help that he can give to support that, the better.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement—all I can say is more power to his renewable elbow. During my time in Parliament, we have gone through various crises. The price of oil and gas goes up, our constituents and businesses pay higher bills, and the Conservatives learn nothing. They do not realise that the only way to provide secure and cheap energy is to have a secure supply here at home. None the less, we are stuck with oil and gas in the meantime. May I urge my right hon. Friend to be open to assisting our constituents and businesses if they see a severe spike in their energy bills?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Before the Secretary of State responds, let me say that I must conclude this session in around 15 minutes. Questions must be shorter and the answers just as sharp.

Ed Miliband: I am glad to hear that my elbow is renewable, and I agree with my hon. Friend that we must be willing to act on behalf of his constituents and others.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. Households, businesses and charities in North West Leicestershire have highlighted some immediate pressures on the cost of heating oil and fuel costs in recent days. Does the Secretary of State agree that energy security across our country is vital and that cheap, clean power is key to delivering that security, so will he share what additional work he will be doing to secure that for families and businesses in North West Leicestershire and beyond?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of heating oil. As I have said a number of times, it is an important issue and is very much on our radar. On her wider point, she is absolutely right.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State is right to say that, because of our reliance on oil and gas, we are a price taker, not a price maker. We are exposed, and families in Burnley, Padiham and Brierfield are worried. Will he continue to strengthen our home-grown sovereign energy supplies and production to keep driving down energy bills? Given the potential for future wholesale price volatility, will he look at getting suppliers in the room again to reduce standing charges, which people see as unfair, regressive and unrelated to their energy use?

Ed Miliband: Somebody asked me about standing charges earlier, and I neglected to respond. One important thing that we did was transfer the warm home discount to unit rates, which helped make a difference in bearing down on standing charges. I reassure my hon. Friend, and many of his constituents and others who are concerned about this issue—I talk to Martin Lewis and others about such matters—that we continue to look at it.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I really thank the Secretary of State for all that he is doing, but at times like this, we think about our most vulnerable constituents. Although the energy price cap will protect

them for now, we worry about the longer term, not least moving into next winter. Can my right hon. Friend say what he is doing on social prescriptions and social tariffs to ensure that we protect the most vulnerable constituents?

Ed Miliband: An important decision that we took was to extend the warm home discount not only for this winter, but for five years ahead, to give an assurance to 6 million people, including those in my hon. Friend's constituency, that they would have protection. She speaks so well for the most vulnerable in our society and in her constituency. I reassure her that we know about people's exposure and continue to look at all the measures that we can take to help them.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): There is precious little good news around at the moment, but I may have some for the Secretary of State. I have listened to the contributions from those on the Opposition Benches, and I think I have discovered a new renewable energy source: the amount of hot air coming from that side of the House could surely heat 100 homes. At a time when prices are spiking and profits are about to rise, does the Secretary of State think that his constituents in Doncaster North would welcome it if we did what the shadow Minister suggested and cut the energy profits levy? My constituents in Lichfield, Burntwood and the villages would not appreciate it if we let companies off like that.

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend makes his point in a very eloquent and amusing way. It is so important to recognise that crises like this show that gambling on low fossil fuel prices is dangerous, because the impacts of geopolitical instability on his constituents and those across the country are so great.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, although I will gently disagree with one point. He said that he believes the Conservatives have failed to learn, or somehow forgotten, the lessons from Ukraine. I think that it is worse than that, and nothing more than short-term opportunism. They hoped that nothing like Ukraine would happen again and they forgot to learn the lessons, so bills were driven up and significant damage was done to our economy. Does he agree that the Conservatives' short-term opportunism on energy security and national security is not in the long-term interest of our country?

Ed Miliband: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is incumbent on all of us to tell people, on the basis of the evidence, what we should be doing as a country. Today we have heard from Members of different parties a recognition that gambling on fossil fuels is incredibly dangerous.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): Today's statement is a stark reminder that energy security is national security and economic security, and those who oppose clean, green British power are handing a gift to people who wish to do us harm. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that it is only the British interest that determines energy policy?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend puts it incredibly well: this is about clean, home-grown power that we control. We need to get off the roller coaster of fluctuations in international markets, which does such damage to families across the country.

Mary Glendon (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): At a time when the UK is increasingly dependent on and exposed to internationally traded LNG, does delaying the oil and gas price mechanism not risk reducing investment in domestic supply exactly when global markets are least stable?

Ed Miliband: I agree with my hon. Friend that driving to renewables and clean, home-grown power is crucial. I would also say, as I know she takes an interest in these things, that the North sea continues to play an important role in our energy mix and will do so for decades to come.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): It is interesting to note that, for the duration of this statement and the question and answer session, there has been zero participation from the SNP and Reform, which goes to show exactly how much both parties care about Scotland's energy security.

I appreciate that the Secretary of State will not be able to give an in-depth response at the Dispatch Box, but can he give any update on Project Willow at Grangemouth? Specifically, I want to know about the future jobs coming to the town and any potential Government ownership to secure our industrial security and Scotland's energy sovereignty.

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is a very important advocate for his constituents and, indeed, for Project Willow. He will know that we have made a number of announcements about Grangemouth in recent months, but I can assure him that we will continue to drive forward on Project Willow. The Prime Minister has set out that £200 million will be available from the National Wealth Fund. We continue to work with private industry, because we are determined to create a future for Grangemouth and its communities.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): This will be a worrying time not only for households, but for the energy-intensive businesses in my constituency. Last year, we lost soda ash production from Northwich after 150 years, in part due to the high energy costs. What support does my right hon. Friend intend to provide businesses both to get through this crisis and into the future, so that we can ensure they stay viable and competitive?

Ed Miliband: The step forward we are taking is to give more help to the energy-intensives, both this April and when we get to help 7,000 businesses next April. However, I acknowledge—as I did to, I think, one of the Conservative Members—that there is further to go on helping businesses. Energy UK and the CBI have formed a joint partnership looking at these issues, and we want to work with them. As always, one challenge is the cost of action, but we recognise the issue that my hon. Friend has raised.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): The statement, for which I am very grateful, really drives home the importance of energy security and the move to renewables, but food security is equally important. In my constituency of South Derbyshire, we have had a plethora of applications for battery energy storage systems and solar farms, because we have a close connection to two grids. I am not saying that we do not need that, but will the Secretary of State meet me, my hon. Friend the

[Samantha Niblett]

Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) and other members of the Labour rural research group to discuss the benefits of a local area energy plan?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend speaks very well on these issues, and I am sure the Minister for Energy will meet the group's members and talk to them about these issues. As she will know, we operate under guidance from the last Government about avoiding the best available land where at all possible. Even on the most ambitious plans, solar would occupy a very small fraction of agricultural land, although we had the largest ever solar auction in allocation round 7—

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): How much?

Ed Miliband: Actually, 5 GW, which is really good.

James Wild: How much will that cost?

Ed Miliband: I will tell the hon. Member how much: at the cheapest, about £60 per MWh, which is far cheaper than building new gas. The fundamental point of this statement is that we will carry on with our drive to clean, home-grown power, because that is the right thing for our national interest.

Point of Order

1.43 pm

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Government are today bringing forward a statutory instrument that, according to national media reports, will make significant changes to support for asylum seekers. The Home Secretary has just delivered a speech to the press to announce the changes. I know that you and Mr Speaker are staunch defenders of the right of MPs to hear such announcements first, and to be able to scrutinise and debate changes such as this statutory instrument. Indeed, our constituents, who have elected us, deserve nothing less. May I ask for your guidance about how the House can properly scrutinise this announcement, and others like it that will surely come in the future?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I thank the hon. Member for giving notice of that point of order, and I can confirm that I have not been given notice of a further statement by the Government. Major policy announcements should be made to the House first, as Mr Speaker has frequently reiterated. There has been a written ministerial statement today, but I am sure those on the Treasury Bench will have heard the feedback about Members having a chance to scrutinise. The Table Office or the Journal Office may be able to advise on such opportunities for the statutory instrument that has been mentioned. I can see Front Benchers nodding affirmatively.

BILL PRESENTED

MINISTERIAL SALARIES (AMENDMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order Nos. 50 and 57)

Darren Jones, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, James Murray, Nick Thomas-Symonds and Chris Ward presented a Bill to make provision about the maximum number of salaries that may be paid under the Ministerial and other Salaries Act 1975 in respect of certain ministerial offices.

Bill read the First time, to be read a Second time on Monday 9 March, and to be printed (Bill 401).

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (ANTICIPATION AND ADJUSTMENTS) (NO. 2) BILL

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 56), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Question put forthwith, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Backbench Business

Commonwealth Troops: First World War

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Jas Athwal, who will speak for up to 15 minutes.

1.45 pm

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the contributions of Commonwealth troops in the First World War.

I grew up in Ilford as a youngster with my childhood friends Harp and Sukha. We were ordinary lads bound together by a love for football, and oblivious to the fact that our fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers could, unknown to us, similarly have been bound together, but on the battlefields of Europe. How were we to know? That was not taught in schools, and it was not shown in the films I watched on the silver screen as a child. It was as if the heroism of the troops from what we now call the Commonwealth had simply been airbrushed out of history.

The reality was very different. When Britain entered the first world war in August 1914, it did not stand alone. From across the oceans and continents, and from villages and cities thousands of miles away, the Commonwealth answered the clarion call. They came from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Caribbean, Africa and the Indian subcontinent, then known as British India. They had different languages, different cultures and different faiths, yet they stood together with a shared purpose. They stood together because, in that moment, the Commonwealth stood as one.

On Monday, we mark Commonwealth Day, which is a moment not only of celebration, but of remembrance of the extraordinary contribution made by soldiers from across the Commonwealth—the men and women whose courage and sacrifice helped to shape the world we live in today.

The first world war is often remembered through images of muddy trenches in France and Belgium, yet the reality was far wider. The war stretched across continents from the fields of Flanders to the deserts of Mesopotamia, and from the mountains of Gallipoli to the plains of east Africa. Across all these theatres of war, soldiers of the Commonwealth fought and fell side by side. Over 620,000 Canadians answered the call, more than 416,000 Australians enlisted and about 136,000 New Zealanders served, while from the Caribbean, thousands volunteered for the British West Indian Regiment, crossing the ocean to fight a war not of their making.

From the undivided India, the contribution was immense. More than 1.3 million soldiers from the Indian subcontinent served in the first world war—in the trenches of Europe, the deserts of Africa and the battlefields of the middle east. Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs stood shoulder to shoulder with the British Tommy. They travelled thousands of miles from home, leaving behind families and communities, who would carry the weight of their absence for a lifetime, because many would never return. Most had never seen Europe before—and many had never known the freezing winters of the western front—yet when they arrived they faced one of the most brutal forms of warfare the world had ever witnessed.

At the onset of the great war, King George V appealed directly to the proud martial tradition of the Punjabis, invoking a single, powerful word: *izzat*—honour, duty, reputation. He declared:

“Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers and Men: I look to all my Indian soldiers to uphold the *izzat* of the British Raj against an aggressive and relentless enemy.”

It was a deliberate and unmistakable call to men whose identities were rooted in honour, whose regiments carried generations of service, and whose sense of duty ran deep—and they answered.

A few weeks later, as the situation on the western front became increasingly perilous, the Secretary of State for War, a certain Lord Kitchener, rose in Parliament to steady a nation anxious about defence in Europe. He told the other place:

“On their way from India are certain Divisions from the Indian Army, composed of highly trained and very efficient troops, and a body of Cavalry including regiments of historic fame.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 17 September 1914; Vol. 17, c. 736.]

His speech was received to rapturous applause. Those words carried urgency and hope, because reinforcements were coming. Across thousands of miles of ocean, ships pressed westward carrying men who had never seen Europe.

In September 1914, Indian troops arrived in France. Within weeks, they would be in the trenches. Among them were men of the Lahore Division, recruited largely from the Punjab. They were among the first colonial forces to land in France to defend the Crown. The Sikhs had well and truly arrived. Landing in Marseille, they were greeted like heroes. French women rushed forward with flowers and embraces, hailing them as the saviours of France, but admiration could not shield those fine men from one of the most desperate moments of war. Within weeks, they found themselves fighting in one of the fiercest battles of the conflict: the first battle of Ypres. German forces launched massive assaults, determined to break through allied lines. The fighting was relentless, trenches were overrun, artillery pounded the earth day and night, and machine gun fire swept across the fields. In those trenches stood soldiers who had travelled from the golden fields of Punjab, from Bengal and from villages across the Indian subcontinent.

Among them was a Muslim soldier, Khudadad Khan, a machine gunner from the British Indian Army. In October 1914, his unit came under overwhelming attack. German troops advanced in large numbers, intent on tearing through allied lines. One by one, the soldiers around him fell, but Khan did not waver. Even as he was badly wounded, he stood relentless in the face of the enemy. His courage held the line, delaying the German advance and preventing a breakthrough that could have changed the course of that battle. For his extraordinary bravery, he became the first Indian soldier, a Muslim, to receive the Victoria Cross—the highest, most prestigious medal of all. His story reminds us of something profound: heroism knows no nationality and courage has no borders.

Across the Commonwealth, millions of soldiers stepped forward. They were farmers, students, labourers, clerks and teachers—ordinary people placed in extraordinary circumstances. In the trenches, life was very harsh and unforgiving. Mud filled the trenches, shellfire shook the ground, cold winters and relentless rain turned battlefields into oceans of mud, and letters were written to homes never reached. One soldier wrote home of a cold that pierced through his uniform, of frost covering the ground

[*Jas Athwal*]

and of the sheer strangeness of fighting in a land so far from home. And yet they stood firm. In the trenches, it did not matter where someone came from or the colour of their skin. What mattered was who they stood beside: a Sikh soldier sharing a trench with a Scottish highlander; a Muslim cavalryman alongside an English infantryman; a Caribbean volunteer marching with an Australian battalion. They were of different faiths, languages and cultures, yet were united by a shared commitment, loyalty and courage.

The story of the Commonwealth in both the world wars is not only the story of soldiers; it is the story of labourers, nurses, porters and support workers—the men and women whose efforts made victory possible. Everywhere across the war, the Commonwealth was present, and everywhere, the cost was immense. More than 1.1 million soldiers from across the British empire and the Commonwealth lost their lives in the first world war, according to records maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing such an important debate. I join him in paying tribute to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, which does such important work conserving sites across the country. I was lucky enough to have a tour of the Holy Ghost cemetery in Basingstoke. Will he also join me in paying tribute to the volunteers who preserve these important sites and ensure that troops from across the Commonwealth, their service and their sacrifice are honoured today and into the future?

Jas Athwal: I absolutely agree with everything my hon. Friend said.

From undivided India alone, around 74,000 soldiers were killed, each one a son, a brother, a husband or a friend—each one a life cut short by war. For many years, the full story of Commonwealth contributions was not widely recognised. Remembrance often focused on Europe, but gradually, history is correcting that imbalance. Research by British Future found that in 2014, only 22% of people knew that Muslim soldiers fought for Britain in the first world war. By 2018, that figure had risen to 38%, but a lot of people are still oblivious to that fact. Soldiers from the Christian faith remained the most widely recognised, at 79%, while awareness of the Sikh contribution rose from 34% to 38%, with Jewish and Hindu soldiers also increasingly recognised. It also found that 75% of the public agree that learning more about South Asian contributions to world war history could help social cohesion in Britain. It is encouraging to see that growing recognition of the ethnic and faith diversity of the armies that served Britain.

One example is Hardit Malik, the first Indian Sikh to fly as a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps during the first world war. He had joined the corps in 1917, after initially being rejected because of the colour of his skin, and yet he persevered, flying combat missions over France and Italy and even facing the famed Red Baron. He also went on to play first-class cricket for Sussex and at Oxford University, where he studied. Hardit Singh Malik lives in our memory and through the words spoken in this House.

Across Britain and throughout the Commonwealth, historians, museums and memorial organisations are working to ensure that the sacrifice of all those who served is remembered, with no story left behind and no hero forgotten. Institutions such as the Imperial War Museum preserve letters, photographs and personal accounts from soldiers across the world. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission maintains cemeteries and memorials across more than 150 countries. When we visit these cemeteries today, we see something absolutely remarkable: row after row of headstones, some marked with a Christian cross, some with the Islamic crescent, some with Sikh khandas, some with the Hindu om, and some with no religious symbol at all—different names and different backgrounds, but equal in sacrifice and in remembrance.

The story of Commonwealth soldiers in the first world war is more than a chapter of history; it is part of the foundation of the modern Commonwealth, and a testament that, long before globalisation became a common phrase, people from across the world were already connected through shared struggle and sacrifice. It reminds us that diversity has always been part of our story, since long before the community's contribution to our NHS and our public services, contributions that today are so often the only measure used to justify our belonging to Great Britain. It reminds us that true unity does not erase our differences, but embraces them. The men who fought together in the trenches did not become the same. They remained proudly who they were, but they stood together. Sometimes, that is what matters most.

As we mark Commonwealth Day, we reflect on the contributions of the diverse communities who came together to defeat tyranny. We remember that they came from every corner of the Commonwealth, from distant villages and bustling cities, and from different cultures and faiths, yet when history called, they answered together. They fought together, and many of them fell together. More than a century later, their legacy still speaks to us. It reminds us that the strength of our society always comes from unity, from standing together in difficult times, and from recognising that our shared humanity is stronger than the differences that divide us. Today, we honour them not only for the battles they fought and the sacrifices they made, but for the example they left behind. At a time when language, race, religion and skin colour are too often used to divide us, the story of these soldiers reminds us of something far greater. It reminds us that people of different backgrounds can come together in the service of something bigger than themselves, that courage transcends culture, that honour transcends borders, and that unity forged in sacrifice can endure.

It is easy to forget. The omission of this shared history of valour has rendered the nation's classrooms, museums and silver screens bereft of an inclusive, balanced heritage education. In multicultural Britain, this has led to a lack of awareness and, ultimately, the propagation of misinformation in popular culture to the detriment of British Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. An example of courage, service and, above all, unity, they came from every corner of the world, but in the trenches of the first world war, they stood as one. Because of them, we remember that the Commonwealth was never simply a collection of nations. It was, and remains, a community bound by shared history, shared sacrifice and a shared hope for the future. Let us remember that there is more that unites us than divides us.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Back Benchers are on a six-minute speaking limit.

2.2 pm

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) on securing the debate.

“Their name liveth for evermore”—

Those words are carved on to each stone of remembrance in large Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries and memorials right around the world. Today’s debate, ahead of Commonwealth Day on Monday 9 March, speaks to that phrase suggested by Rudyard Kipling, as we remember the legacy of those we commemorate.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission, once referred to as the Imperial War Graves Commission—the name was altered in 1960, for obvious reasons, when the Commonwealth was formed—represents ultimately six countries whose troops came together from the Commonwealth to serve in the first world war, and again in the second world war. However, along with those six countries, many others are represented, as was alluded to in the first speech. There are Commonwealth War Graves Commission sites in 23,000 locations, and 153 countries and territories. For those who do not know, I previously worked for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, and whereas I would formerly have had an hour for such a speech, I obviously have a bit less time this afternoon, but I hope to do its work justice.

It is important to reflect on the fact that there are sites right across the world that are impacted by ongoing conflict, but the commission has a commitment to maintaining and upkeeping its sites in perpetuity. For those who do not know, there is a uniformity to the commission’s commemoration. Every single person we are aware of who died in service in the first or second world war receives either a headstone or a memorial. These are different from village and town memorials. They are specific to the commission, and they commemorate those who fell between 4 August 1914 and 31 August 1921, and between 3 September 1939 and 31 December 1947. Those who visit commission sites might notice that some died after the ending of the wars. They may well have died of illness after those dates.

In my remaining time, I want to focus on the contribution of Commonwealth troops across the south-west. In my constituency of South West Devon, 137 people from Commonwealth troops are commemorated across 26 sites. Of those, 61 are from the first world war, and they served at least five nations. Plymouth as a whole commemorates over 25,000, most significantly on the naval memorial on Plymouth Hoe, but also right across the city in local churchyards and villages.

The role of the CWGC is to commemorate those troops and to tell their stories. A big part of that is a project called “Evermore”. Two years ago, I would have struggled to tell these stories, but members of the public have made their contributions, and we now have much more information about the men and women we commemorate. It is best to share those stories, and that is exactly what I am going to do today.

Ernest John Quest would have been a constituent of mine, were he still alive. He was born in Lee Moor and was buried in the Methodist graveyard there. It is a tiny village near the China clay works. It is pretty bleak, but

that is where he was born, raised, and ultimately buried. He joined the Australian munitions workers, having gone out to Australia as a British man in his early 20s. He came back towards the end of the war, and served in munitions, to ensure that we had enough equipment to fight the war. He came back at the beginning of 1918 and sadly, by the end of the year, he had died of pneumonia. As he was in the UK doing that work, he could be buried close to home with what would be called a private memorial. He does not have a commission headstone; his family put their own headstone in place for him. The munitions workers came because they were offered a freebie, effectively. They came over here to work and provide that service, but they are key among those whom the commission commemorates, both in the UK and abroad.

James Wilson was from an equally small part of my constituency, Yelverton on Dartmoor. Anybody from there watching this speech will know the Devon Tors hotel, a key landmark on a big roundabout. His father ran it as a boarding house. He, too, went to Australia, and was a single farmer in 1915 when he enlisted. He served with the Australian Imperial Force in France. Sadly, he died just after the war of influenza and pneumonia and was buried in the tiny village of Meavy on Dartmoor. He links to my favourite grave—not something I ever thought I would say, but when you work for the commission, that becomes what you talk about. It is the grave of a man called Charles Allen, who was also Australian. He is unique, because I believe that he has the only such grave in the UK with his photograph on it. He was a very handsome man. He was killed in 1917, and his granite stone cross in Efford cemetery has a little enamel plate with his photograph on. For those on a tour of the cemetery, it serves to show just who these young men were who lost their life. He came to the UK to do his basic training, but sadly died of illness before he even started. We also have a member of the South African Native Labour Corps buried in Wembury, in probably the most picturesque location for a headstone; it overlooks the south Devon coast.

Finally, I want to speak of a family, the Tuckers of Yealmpton. Three brothers were killed between 12 March 1917 and 10 August 1918. They are commemorated in Tyne Cot, and in two French cemeteries. One is missing—we do not know where he is buried—but his brothers have graves. All of them are commemorated by the family back home in Devon. A further Tucker, not related, was born in South Africa and is also commemorated in my constituency, in Plymouth. He died at the age of 33 and is buried in Plympton. Why is that important? We must keep these stories alive; that is more pertinent than ever. I will just flag that War Graves Week is from 16 to 24 May, so there will be plenty of opportunity for Members to show their appreciation for the work of the commission then.

2.9 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) on securing this important debate.

It is important that we recognise the contribution of the Commonwealth troops in the first and the second world wars. When we remember the world wars, we rightly honour the bravery of British servicemen and servicewomen, but Britain did not fight those wars alone. Millions of men and women across the Commonwealth stood alongside

[Yasmin Qureshi]

British forces and played a decisive role in defending freedom in Europe and beyond. More than 1.3 million soldiers from the Indian subcontinent served in the first world war, fighting in some of the most brutal theatres of conflict, including the western front, Gallipoli and the middle east.

It is important to remember that what was known then as British India included regions that today form India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Many of the soldiers who fought for Britain came from areas that are now part of Pakistan, and there was a vast number of Muslim soldiers among those who served. In fact, historians estimate that millions of Muslim soldiers and labourers fought for the allied forces during the two world wars; at least 2.5 million Muslims contributed during the first world war and an estimated 5.5 million during the second world war. Nearly 1.5 million Muslims are believed to have been killed in action across both conflicts. These men travelled thousands of miles from their home to fight in conflicts that were not of their making.

Muslim soldiers fought in the trenches of northern France and Belgium, endured the freezing conditions of European winters and served across battlefields stretching from Europe to north Africa and the middle east. Many fought alongside soldiers of other faiths, sharing food, hardship and danger. There are records of Muslim, Christian and Jewish soldiers learning each other's burial rites, so that the fallen could be laid to rest with dignity on the battlefield.

One lady who is often forgotten is Noor-un-Nisa Inayat Khan, a British Muslim woman and the first wireless operator sent into occupied France. She was betrayed and then arrested and tortured for months before being executed at Dachau concentration camp. She was given a George Cross posthumously.

Despite such enormous sacrifices, the contribution of Muslim soldiers remains largely absent from our national memory. At a time of increasing divisions in our society, and in particular the demonising of Muslims in parts of our political discourse and media—including by some very senior politicians, who should be absolutely ashamed of themselves—Muslims in Britain are too often portrayed as outsiders, or as somehow disconnected from the history of this country, but the truth is different. Muslims were in the trenches of the first world war. They were in the forces that fought fascism during the second world war. They served in the merchant navy, in labour corps and across battlefields around the world. Many of them never returned home. Their sacrifices helped to defend the freedoms and democratic values that we all benefit from today.

In my constituency, many families trace their heritage to the Indian subcontinent, including Pakistan. For many of them, the history of Commonwealth soldiers is not distant history, but part of their family stories. My paternal grandfather fought in the war and my maternal uncle had the King's commission at a time when most people from the Indian subcontinent had the viceroy's commission. That why we have a sense of belonging in this country.

Debates like these matter. They remind us that Britain has always been shaped by the contributions of people from many backgrounds, faith and cultures. When we remember the first and second world wars, we must remember the full story of that shared sacrifice.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I just want to put on the record that I talk about the work of Noor Inayat Khan to my daughter, Farah, so her legacy will not be forgotten.

2.13 pm

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I would like to congratulate the hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal)—for stealing most of my speech. It was absolutely wonderful and very powerful.

We live in very polarising times. As the hon. Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) mentioned, all debates seem to be along the lines of our differences—what religion we are, what colour we are, what creed we are and where we come from. These debates are sadly not just on the airwaves or the news channels, but in this Chamber. It is all about what divides us, and not what brings us together. That is why I thank the hon. Member for Ilford South, in all seriousness, for bringing this debate to the Chamber; it gives us an important opportunity. Many people from my community or background, or from the empire, are not aware of their own history, and so do not have the knowledge to debate these matters coherently.

The contributions made by Commonwealth soldiers in the first world war have been mentioned already by many speakers. They were men of every faith and no faith, and of every colour. Can we imagine living in Africa or British India at a time where there were no televisions and very few photographs, and being sent abroad to a foreign land? It must have been very frightening for them. Some may have seen it as an adventure, but as soon as they landed on this shore, with climates they were unaccustomed to, it must have been a real shock to them.

More than 1.3 million soldiers from British India served in the first world war, including over 400,000 Muslims, 53,000 of whom gave their lives. In total, more than 2.5 million Muslim soldiers and labourers from across the globe supported the allied war effort. The work of the National Muslim War Memorial Trust reminds us that their sacrifice was immense, yet, as we have mentioned already, it is not spoken about very often.

Commonwealth soldiers of all faiths served in the trenches of Europe, in the deserts of north and east Africa, in Madagascar and in the far east. Together, they faced unimaginable hardships, enduring gas attacks, machine gun fire, waterlogged trenches, hunger and fear. We remember that the war was won not only by Britain, but by the Commonwealth united in purpose.

Yet it is painful to acknowledge that the story told through our memorials has been incomplete. Animal sacrifices in the war effort were honoured with a national memorial in Hyde Park in 2004, and rightly so. However, that was way before the black and Asian soldiers who fought, bled and died for Britain were recognised. It is only recently that they have begun to receive that recognition. This is a truth we cannot shy away from. Why did it happen?

We have already heard the story of Khudadad Khan, who was born in 1888 in Punjab and served with the 129th Baluchis, becoming the first Indian soldier to receive the Victoria Cross. We have heard of his bravery in Belgium in 1914, when his regiment was completely outnumbered. Knowing he was the only one alive, he pretended to be dead and slid away in the darkness of

the night; he later came back and, as the hon. Member for Ilford South said, changed the destiny of that battle. Now, his descendants live in Leeds. This is not somebody else's history; it is our history.

Consider Walter Tull, one of the most celebrated black British soldiers of the first world war. He enlisted in 1914, endured shellshock, returned to fight at the Somme and was commissioned as an officer in 1917, despite regulations that should have barred him because of his race. He continued to fight and was mentioned in dispatches for "gallantry and coolness" in Italy in 1918. Sadly, two months later, he died in no man's land.

Think of Lionel Turpin, a 19-year-old from Guyana who travelled to the mother country, as he called it, to serve on the western front. He survived the Somme, but not the effects of gas attacks. Think, too, of the 60,000 black South Africans and 120,000 other Africans who served in the labour units, and of the men of the British West Indies Regiment who, in 1915, sailed all the way from Jamaica to train on the Sussex coast before being deployed to Egypt and beyond.

These people are not and should never be footnotes in history. They were part of the very fabric of our armed forces. They should not be footnotes, but headlines. That is why, when Laurence Fox questioned the inclusion of a Sikh soldier in the fantastic first world war film "1917", it exposed not diversity gone too far, but history not yet understood deeply enough. Sikh soldiers made up more than 20% of the British Indian Army during the war. In my city of Leicester, a statue unveiled in 2022 now commemorates their service—long-overdue recognition of their extraordinary loyalty and courage.

We recognise their bravery, we honour their sacrifice and we commit to remembering them. What does their service teach us today? It teaches us that courage knows no nationality, religion or race. If we allow polarisation to divide us along lines of colour or creed, we dishonour those who stood shoulder to shoulder in the mud of Flanders. If we forget the global nature of their sacrifice, we shrink our own national story.

Let us tell that story fully, teach it honestly and commemorate it properly. For lest we forget—by forgetting, we dishonour not only what those troops endured, but the legacy that they pass to us: a nation strengthened, not diminished, by the diversity of those who defended it.

2.19 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): More than 1 million troops from Commonwealth nations died in the "war to end wars". My thanks go to my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) for securing this important debate today to honour their service and the service of their comrades who did survive the first world war.

Anyone who has been in a secondary school history class knows that world war one was the result of hyper-nationalism growing across Europe, coupled with a passion for militarism. Armament is all too familiar once again today, with the perverse and absurd theory that spending billions of pounds more on weaponry than on housing, health, education and funding vital public services will be the route to improving people's living standards.

History shows that after nationalism and militarism, imperialism is likely to follow. Back then, European nations were vying for resources, colonies and the expansion

of trade routes in Africa and Asia, so war was a certainty. History also teaches us that it is mainly nations' working-class populations that are sent off to fight and die. In world war one, the working class, including from Commonwealth nations, were treated as nothing more than fodder; they were disposable. They were sacrificed for glorious imperial gain.

Across two world wars, fanatical nationalism, extreme militarism and the pursuit of imperial supremacy accounted for more than 75 million deaths. We have had terrifying contributions from Members across the Chamber regarding the massive increase in spending to rearm the country. Do people not see that we are heading towards more conflicts, more war, more destruction and more death? The path that we are on will lead only to more suffering for the working class of all nations.

War is a relatively easy thing to talk about, especially for people like me who have never served in a war in uniform. The respect and gratitude that I have for those who have and who do is enormous. Tragically, I find it incredible that the post-war consensus of trying to avoid war at all costs seems to have been largely forgotten.

2.22 pm

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South on securing this important debate and on his powerful opening speech. Many Commonwealth troops made the ultimate sacrifice for us. In my constituency of Glasgow North, there are a number of Commonwealth war grave sites and memorials that commemorate a total of 1,100 individuals. The Western Necropolis in Glasgow North alone contains 500 service personnel from both world wars who are laid to rest in Commonwealth war graves. Among them are Canadians, Australians and even American volunteers who served in Commonwealth forces.

Those sites are an important reminder not just of the sacrifice that Commonwealth soldiers made, but of the role that Glasgow played in the war effort, from shipbuilding on the Clyde to the hospitals caring for the wounded. However, we must also take time to recognise the contribution of those Commonwealth soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice, yet, often due to their nationality, did not receive the recognition they deserved. These forgotten or neglected soldiers were often from the then empire, originating from places such as modern-day Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South and the hon. Member for Leicester South (Shokat Adam) made reference to Khudadad Khan, who was the first Indian Muslim to receive the Victoria Cross. We must do more to ensure that soldiers like Khan, and the more than 4 million British Indian Army soldiers who served in the two world wars, are adequately remembered.

In my constituency, the Colourful Heritage charity has been working hard to promote those contributions through an exhibition in Kelvingrove museum and educational resources for schools across Scotland, helping the public and young people to engage with this history. More recently, Colourful Heritage, along with partners, has been granted planning permission to establish Scotland's first permanent memorial to the British Indian Army in the grounds of Kelvingrove. The design was agreed on after consultation with community and faith groups, as well as with pupils across a number of schools in Scotland. The memorial reflects the diversity of those

[*Martin Rhodes*]

who served—Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and those of no religious faith. Thus far, they have raised more than £100,000, with the aim of raising a total of £270,000 to complete the memorial. I am sure that Members across the House will wish them well in achieving that important goal.

As we reflect today on the contribution of Commonwealth soldiers to the first world war, I note that our understanding of it deepens over time, as new stories come to light and previously overlooked service is properly recognised.

Rebecca Smith: The hon. Member is making a powerful speech. Does he agree that this is where the role of the public engagement co-ordinators at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission is so important, as they go out to tell those stories? We have graves right around the country of Indian, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh service personnel. Ensuring that communities understand that they are in our midst is very important, as is highlighting the Neuve-Chapelle memorial to the Indians on the western front as well.

Martin Rhodes: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. I recognise the important work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and its outreach and public engagement teams. I also recognise the huge contribution of volunteers in promoting that work.

How we commemorate and who we commemorate must reflect the full breadth of those who served and sacrificed. I hope that the first permanent memorial to the British Indian Army in the grounds of Kelvingrove will be a testament to that. Madam Deputy Speaker, we must remember our shared past if we are to help build our shared future.

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

2.26 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) for securing this important debate. I, like him, want to start by sharing the story of Khudadad Khan for his extraordinary courage in holding off wave after wave of German infantry in 1914. He became the first soldier of Indian origin to receive the Victoria Cross. What makes his story even more remarkable is the moment at which it occurred. In late 1914, the British Expeditionary Force had lost around 70% of its original strength. Germany's armies were pushing through the channel ports. Had they broken through, the war could very well have been lost in its first months, and mainland Europe would have likely fallen under the dominion of imperial Germany. But the line held and it did so in part because 45,000 soldiers from India arrived on the western front just in time.

Those soldiers had travelled thousands of miles from the subcontinent. Many arrived still wearing cotton uniforms designed for the heat of the Indian frontier, when they were suddenly thrown into the freezing mud of Flanders. They had never seen trench warfare before. They faced artillery barrages, barbed wire, machine guns and the bitter and unfamiliar cold of a Belgian winter.

Yet they stood firm. That moment tells us something fundamental about the first world war. This was not simply a British story, but very much one of the Commonwealth. More than 3 million soldiers and labourers from across the empire fought alongside Britain in the first world war.

The war memorials in my constituency of Esher and Walton bear testimony to a generation who fought not alone, but shoulder to shoulder with men and women from across the Commonwealth. The numbers alone are staggering. More than 1.4 million came from India, nearly 630,000 from Canada, over 410,000 from Australia, almost 130,000 from New Zealand, and many thousands from the West Indies, Africa, Fiji and beyond. More than half a million Commonwealth soldiers lost their lives. This was not a marginal contribution; it was decisive, and it altered the course of the war.

Britain entered the war in 1914 with a relatively small professional Army. There were about 700,000 trained soldiers in total, including reservists and territorials. Set against the vast conscript armies of the central powers, particularly Germany and Austria-Hungary, this force was tiny.

Without reinforcements from across the empire, Britain could not have sustained the war effort. The wartime Prime Minister David Lloyd George put it clearly. He said that, had they stayed at home, the issue of the war would have been very different and the history of the war would have taken a different course. We often hear that the arrival of the United States in 1917 tipped the balance of the war, and there is truth in that claim, but there is also a powerful argument that without the Commonwealth's contribution, the war might not have lasted long enough for the Americans to arrive at all.

Rebecca Smith: Does the hon. Member agree that a significant contribution was also made by the 140,000-strong Chinese Labour Corps, ironically enough, who came over from 1916 to do a lot of the work on the front, which then freed up the soldiers to do the fighting?

Monica Harding: The hon. Member is entirely right, and I will shortly come on to the forgotten stories of this war.

From the mud of Flanders to the deserts of the middle east, from the jungles of East Africa to the mountains of the Balkans, Commonwealth soldiers were present in almost every theatre of the conflict. Their bravery and resilience, too often forgotten and overlooked, was one of the most notable features of the conflict.

Canadian troops faced chlorine gas for the first time at the second battle of Ypres in 1915, holding the line. At Vimy Ridge in 1917, four Canadian divisions fought together as one for the first time, and in just four days they achieved what the French and British had spent years and over 100,000 lives bravely failing to do. This courage was not confined to the trenches. In the skies above Europe, Canadian airmen distinguished themselves with equal daring. Fighter aces such as Billy Bishop, who was awarded the Victoria Cross, played a crucial role in securing allied control of the air.

Australian troops bravely fought for eight months on the steep cliffs of Gallipoli, before playing a decisive role in the final offensives of 1918. New Zealand, with a population of barely 1 million people at that time, sent more than 120,000 soldiers overseas, nearly one in five of whom never returned.

My own constituency of Esher and Walton has a profound historical connection to New Zealand, dating back to the first world war. During the conflict, Walton served as a major centre for treating injured soldiers from the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, particularly those wounded in the Gallipoli campaign. The Mount Felix mansion was converted into the first New Zealand hospital in the UK. Some 27,000 New Zealand soldiers were treated there, and 21 New Zealand soldiers unfortunately died and are buried in St Mary's churchyard in Walton.

We remember this connection, such as through our roads; New Zealand Avenue runs through the middle of Walton, and we have Adelaide Road too. Since 1920, an annual Anzac Day service is held at St Mary's church. The Mount Felix tapestry features the soldiers at the hospital, and a kowhai tree donated by the New Zealand Government in 1970 stands at the former site of the hospital. My brilliant constituents in Esher and Walton ensure that the sacrifice of those from New Zealand who served in the great war is remembered.

Soldiers from the Caribbean served in the British West Indies Regiment, operating across Europe, Africa and the middle east. Many of them were denied the chance by the British Government to fight as equals. Instead, they were often assigned labour duties, such as digging trenches, unloading ships or carrying supplies. Despite that discrimination, they served with courage and dignity.

African soldiers and porters were indispensable to the campaigns across the continent, carrying ammunition and supplies through terrain that would have stopped any conventional army. They suffered catastrophic losses, but they were the logistical backbone of the campaign, and their story remains one of the least known chapters of the war. Women across the Commonwealth were also vital to the British war effort, serving as nurses, driving ambulances, working in munition factories, and keeping farms and industries running.

In many schools, our students still learn about the Somme, Passchendaele, and the western front but hear very little about the role played by Indian, African, Caribbean, Australian, Canadian and Chinese forces. As Baroness Warsi powerfully put it,

"Our boys weren't just Tommies—they were Tariqs and Tajinders too".

When we speak of those who served in the first world war, we are speaking about people from every corner of what was then the British empire—people who crossed oceans to fight for a country they had never seen, people who fought in climates and conditions utterly alien to them, people who believed that they were fighting for principles, freedom, justice and the defence of small nations. Yet the response of the British Government in the immediate aftermath often fell far short of the ideals that these men believed they had fought for. West Indian soldiers were excluded from the London victory parade. In India, promises of reform made in return for wartime loyalty were followed by the brutality of the Amritsar massacre.

The first world war reshaped not only Europe but the political map of the world. The modern Commonwealth and the family of nations that it represents today has its roots in the sacrifices made during that war. That brings us to the present. We must honour the shared history that binds us to the Commonwealth. Let us ensure that their contributions are fully recognised. Their service

must be fully integrated into our national commemorations, and their stories taught in schools so that young people understand that the first world war was not fought by Britain alone.

We must uphold the vital work of organisations such as the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and its volunteers, whose quiet dedication ensures that the name of the fallen, regardless of their nationality, faith or background, are remembered with dignity. We fought alongside a brave coalition of nations and peoples—millions of individuals whose courage, labour and sacrifice made victory possible. They fought in the mud of Belgium, the deserts of Palestine, the mountains of Greece and the jungles of East Africa. Tragically, many of them never came home. They were asked to fight and, sometimes, to die for a country that they had never seen. Let us, a century later, remember why they came and the bravery with which they fought not as a footnote to history but as an essential part of the story of how that tragic war was fought and won.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

2.36 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): As the son of a man who fought in the second world war, I am privileged to be able to sum up on behalf of His Majesty's loyal Opposition in this debate about those who fell in the first world war and the vital contribution made by Commonwealth troops during that epic conflict.

The first world war turned out to be a manpower-intensive conflict in which the contribution of Commonwealth troops was invaluable. The National Army Museum at Chelsea estimates that over 3 million soldiers and labourers from across what was then the British empire, today the Commonwealth, served alongside the British Army in multiple theatres of operations. We have heard a number of erudite and touching tributes from hon. Members to that effect this afternoon, and I will refer to a few of them, but before I do there is one other important point I want to make.

Where is Reform? We are here to debate the contribution of people from all nations, of all colours, of all cultures, made 100 years or more ago, to defending the freedom of what was then the empire and is now the Commonwealth. Why is Reform's Bench yet again empty when we debate defence-related matters? If those plastic patriots who love to wrap themselves in the flag aspire to be a party of government, let them at least come to this House and behave like it.

Turning to the contributions of Members, I commend the hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) for securing this debate and, if I may say so, for introducing it so brilliantly. He spoke memorably about the extraordinary contribution of the Indian Army—Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs all joined together as one army fighting for freedom against tyranny. He said that honour transcends borders. He was right.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) spoke very knowledgeably about the vital work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, not least because she worked for it. She highlighted the commission's marvellous endeavours to commemorate the sacrifices that were made in defence of freedom. On behalf of my party, I would like to commend the Commonwealth War Graves Commission for everything that it does.

[Mr Mark Francois]

The hon. Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) spoke powerfully about the contribution of the Indian Army, and especially its Muslim regiments. The hon. Member for Leicester South (Shokat Adam) followed her in a similar vein and spoke in particular about the Sikh regiments who have a proud martial tradition in British service, not least in the first world war.

The hon. Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) made, if I might say, a very socialist contribution, but he also paid tribute to those who served. The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes) paid a fulsome tribute to Commonwealth troops. The Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding), reminded us that after the largely regular British Expeditionary Force was wiped out while holding the line in 1914, it was eventually citizens' armies, including from the Commonwealth, who replaced it to win the war.

As there were multiple contributions from across the empire and the Commonwealth during the First World War, it would be invidious to attempt to highlight any one as more important than the others. It might be better to attempt to summarise briefly—in the few minutes that I have to cover a war that lasted four years—some of the national contributions to the wider war effort.

I begin with the Canadians. Following the outbreak of the war, Canada established the Canadian Expeditionary Force, principally for service on the western front. The Canadians fought in many of the major battles in that theatre, including the second Ypres, the Somme, Vimy Ridge and Passchendaele. In so doing, they were supported by troops from Newfoundland, although that did not formally become part of Canada until after the second world war. The Newfoundland regiment also fought at Gallipoli and then on the western front, including in the so-called last hundred days when the allied armies—the British Army in particular, but with Commonwealth support—broke the back of the German army in the field.

That victory, fully utilising the principle of combined operations including infantry, artillery, tanks and aircraft working in concert, should not be underestimated. It is often highlighted by military historians as a significant feat of arms, completely contrary to what might be called the “Blackadder” version of the history of the first world war.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Al Carns) indicated assent.

Mr Francois: I see that the Minister is nodding in assent.

The Australians also made a major contribution to the first world war. Over 400,000 served in what was known as the Australian Imperial Force. Over half of them became casualties, either killed or wounded.

Perhaps the most famous Australian contribution, combined with their comrades from New Zealand, was in the ill-fated campaign at Gallipoli in 1915 when the Australian and New Zealand army corps, now forever known as the Anzacs, suffered heavy casualties attempting to overcome the extremely well dug-in Turkish defences on the peninsula. Nevertheless, it is important to record that Anzac troops also served bravely in other theatres of war, not least in the middle east and on the western front.

India, which many hon. Members referred to, made the largest contribution from the Commonwealth, particularly if we include those from what is now modern day Bangladesh and Pakistan. I think it contributed more than a million troops in total over the course of the first world war.

I should declare an interest here as my great-grandfather-in-law Colonel William Sanders served as part of the Indian Army, and at one time commanded a battery of artillery towed by elephants. *[Interruption.]* He did. He then transferred to the Royal Garrison Artillery on the western front, winning a Distinguished Service Order at the battle of St Quentin, about which the family are obviously proud. The Indian Army of today, and its Bangladeshi and Pakistani counterparts, maintain proud regimental histories that date back to their actions in the first world war.

South African regiments also made an important contribution to the allied war effort, including the 1st South African Brigade, who famously fought at Delville Wood, which the troops nicknamed “Devil’s Wood”, on the Somme. Given what they went through, that was probably appropriate. The South Africans fought not just on the western front but against German troops on the African continent itself, including in both east and south-west Africa. It is also important to record the contribution of some 60,000 black South Africans who served mainly in support and logistical roles rather than as frontline infantry but nevertheless made an important contribution to the allied war effort, as indeed was recognised by General Jan Smuts.

Rebecca Smith: On the South African regiments, does my right hon. Friend agree it is vital that the Commonwealth War Graves Commission continues its work to honour those labourers, as it has done with the recent opening of a memorial in Cape Town—and, soon, in Kenya and Sierra Leone—with a commitment to do whatever it takes to ensure that those African labourers, who have not yet been commemorated, are commemorated in the future?

Mr Francois: My hon. Friend is clearly a subject matter expert. I entirely agree with her sentiment about both the contribution of those South African labourers and the vital work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

It is also important to commemorate the contribution of Caribbean troops to the allied war effort. Most of them, as we have heard, served in the West Indies Regiment, which saw combat in France, Italy, Africa and the middle east. Indeed, that was pointed out in particular by the hon. Member for Esher and Walton.

Albeit from a different conflict, I can reveal to the House that the records of the ship’s company of HMS Victory at Trafalgar record the presence of a seaman whose name was John Francois. He was on Victory. I do not believe he was a direct relative, as he was recruited from the Caribbean—none the less, I can assure the House that there was at least one Francois at Trafalgar who served on the British side.

In the limited time available, I have been able to refer with only the briefest outline to the contribution of troops from across the British empire and the Commonwealth to what was believed—at that time, at least—to be the war to end all wars. Unfortunately, that

proved not to be the case; the world was involved in a second major conflagration barely two decades later. Let us passionately hope that in our lifetimes—indeed, in those of our children and grandchildren—we never see a third. Although I say humbly to the hon. Member for Alloa and Grangemouth, as the Roman military theorist Vegetius taught us, “*Si vis pacem, para bellum*”: he who desires peace should prepare for war in order to deter it.

In thinking of how to conclude, I came upon some lines from Rupert Brooke. In his eternal poem “The Soldier”, he wrote:

“If I should die, think only this of me:
That there’s some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England.”

If that be so—and I believe it to be so—then there is also a part of a neighbouring field that is forever Canadian, Australian, New Zealander, South African, Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and African and Caribbean, too. Without the contribution of all those nations from right across what was then the empire and is now the Commonwealth, we would never have defeated the militarism of the Kaiser’s Germany, and Europe undoubtedly would never have been free. We thank them all and their nations for their service. Lest we forget.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Well, follow that, Minister.

2.48 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Al Carns): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) for securing this very important debate at a very important time, to all the hon. and right hon. Members for their thoughtful contributions, and to the spirit of the House.

The role played by Commonwealth forces in the first world war is pivotal; indeed, it is legendary—an all too often overlooked chapter of our nation’s history. I am grateful that this debate will help us tell that story to this generation. The contribution of those forces is etched in stone at the heart of London, on the memorial gates on Constitution Hill, on which are inscribed:

“In memory of the five million volunteers from the Indian sub-continent, Africa and the Caribbean who fought with Britain in two world wars.”

It is a fitting memorial that honours around 3 million people from the Commonwealth who volunteered and fought in world war one, from the Indian subcontinent, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Africa and as far as the Caribbean.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): The Minister mentions commemoration in London. In my part of south-east London, I had the pleasure of going, with representatives of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, to look at the graves that it maintains. Does he agree that the commission plays a vital role, not only in commemorating those who have fallen, but in educating children and young people today about the contributions that were made?

Al Carns: I completely agree. The commission maintains and looks after thousands of memorials all over the world, which helps us continue to educate and to communicate an important lesson.

The memorial in London commemorates the campaigns fought: on the western front, in Gallipoli, Russia, the middle east and Africa—indeed, in every major theatre of the conflict. It is also a memorial that rightly immortalises Commonwealth recipients of the Victoria Cross during the great war. They include brave men like Khudadad Khan, who was mentioned earlier: a courageous soldier in the British Indian Army who single-handedly held back the enemy to enable reinforcements to arrive. He was the first non-British recipient of our highest military honour during the first world war.

Of the 1 million people under British command killed during the first world war, nearly a quarter came from the Commonwealth nations. Having served in multiple theatres of conflict to protect the country that I am really proud to call home, and having lost good colleagues and friends, I have some ideas of the sacrifice they loyally made, but not—in any way, shape or form—of the scale. Over 74,000 people came from India, 65,000 from Canada, more than 62,000 from Australia, 18,000 from New Zealand and nearly 12,000 from South Africa. Their names are recorded by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission across cemeteries and memorials on every continent, with dedicated memorials inaugurated or under construction in Cape Town, Nairobi, and Freetown in Sierra Leone. Commonwealth forces are honoured prominently during remembrance, with Commonwealth high commissioners playing a high-profile role in commemorations at the Cenotaph—but we must do more. Today we remember their service and their sacrifice, and I am delighted that their legacy lives on in our armed forces.

Let me turn to some of the comments made during the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South made some poignant remarks; different languages, different cultures and different faiths came together to fight for a common good, demonstrating incredible honour, unbelievable duty and outstanding courage. The key lesson from that is that it did not matter where someone came from, their religion or their race; they were united in a common cause.

The hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) was right to point out the outstanding work done by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, and I commend her for her past and ongoing support for it. The commission commemorates 1.7 million casualties across the globe, and even now, we have 5,000 Commonwealth personnel serving in the British military. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) told us a truly remarkable story about a wireless operator deployed behind enemy lines and covertly inserted into France, describing how Commonwealth forces, or individuals from further afield, played every part in the operational tapestry of both the first and second world wars.

The hon. Member for Leicester South (Shockat Adam) highlighted how our histories are entwined, but said that in some cases we fail to educate and to communicate that, in particular to the youth of the nation. He said that if we are to push in the same direction, we must understand our shared history and the common cause of democracy, the rule of law, the right to self-determination and equal rights.

My hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) made some interesting comments and said that war is easy to talk about. Well, I can tell him now that war, if you have been engaged in it, is not

[*Al Carns*]

easy to talk about. The best way to avoid conflict is to deter it, and I support the comments of the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) that we do not deter it by not preparing for it. I try to keep politics out of this debate, because this is not about a lack of realism; it is about remembrance.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes) mentioned the importance of education and communication to bind us together, to build bridges and to remove the division that people are sowing. He said that we must deal in unity, hope and ambition to drive the country forward, and I completely commend that narrative. The hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding) pointed to the staggering contributions from across the Commonwealth, as we have heard from many people—such a poignant thing to dwell on.

The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford highlighted the lack of individuals from certain parties in this House today. Well, I will tell him where they are. They are probably out on social media, painting the sky grey and then selling the country umbrellas. It is an absolute travesty that they are not here to hear about the joint history that every Member has mentioned, and to talk about the shared sacrifice and what unity can indeed overcome.

I commend points made about the early stages of combined arms manoeuvre—something we see in Ukraine with the use of uncrewed systems, which is changing how we fight. Unfortunately, conflict tends to be the mother of invention.

My final point is this. When individuals from the Commonwealth came to fight, it was a huge unifying factor. Bombs, bullets and battlefields do not discriminate. They served together, they died together, and now we must focus on how we tell their story to ensure that we live together.

I again express my gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South for securing this debate. I am pleased that we have had the chance to mark the loyalty, courage and sacrifice of Commonwealth soldiers during the first world war. More than a century later, their legacy still inspires many young men and women. We must do more to honour their sacrifice and increase our ability to collectively recruit people into the British armed forces from all walks of life. As our debate has shown, their legacy continues to inspire us all.

2.56 pm

Jas Athwal: I thank all colleagues who have contributed to the debate; it is really appreciated. As I close the debate, I would like to make the declaration that my paternal great-grandfather served in the first world war, and my maternal grandfather served in the second world war. I often remember a quote by General Sir Ian Hamilton; I never met my great-grandfather—he passed away before I was born—but if I want to remember him, it is like this. Writing to the commander-in-chief shortly after a particular charge, General Sir Ian Hamilton paid noble tribute to the heroism of all ranks of the Ferozepore Sikhs:

“In the highest sense of the word extreme gallantry has been shown by this fine Battalion...In spite of the tremendous losses there was not a sign of wavering all day. Not an inch of ground gained was given up and not a single straggler came back. The ends of the enemy’s trenches leading into the ravine were found to be blocked with the bodies of Sikhs and of the enemy who died fighting at close quarters, and the glacia slope was thickly dotted with the bodies of these fine soldiers all lying on their faces as they fell in their steady advance on the enemy.”

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the contributions of Commonwealth troops in the First World War.

Palliative Care

[Relevant documents: Third Special Report of the Health and Social Care Committee, Expert Panel: Evaluation of Palliative care in England, HC 632, and the Government response, HC 1722; and oral evidence taken before the Health and Social Care Committee on 7 January, on Palliative care, HC 632.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Rachael Maskell, who will speak for about 15 minutes.

2.58 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House notes the findings of the Independent Palliative Care Commission; calls on the Government to implement its recommendations in full, including to establish a comprehensive and specialist palliative care service that is equally accessible to everyone and properly funded, as well as a new commissioning framework that secures a service across all settings and is available from the point of a terminal diagnosis, the advancement of a life-limiting illness or latter stages of a chronic condition; and further calls on the Government to have a focus on workforce planning and training, to provide a comprehensive palliative care service, and to ensure that patients are empowered through future care plans to articulate what they want to happen towards the end of their life, while also establishing bereavement services for all.

I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to the Backbench Business Committee for granting today's debate on the future of palliative care. Although I applied for it last summer, it could not be more timely, as the Government consider their modern service framework.

Dame Cicely Saunders said:

"How people die remains in the memory of those who live on."

By addressing what she called "total pain"—physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual and social pain—palliative medicine could transform not only the way we approach death, but how we embrace life. Her legacy has since driven palliative medicine, with dedicated teams delivering care. Someone told me in York that they did not know

"that such outstanding care was even possible."

Every complexity is embraced and addressed.

In 2024, 532,000 people died in England. Marie Curie evidence published two weeks ago showed that one in three people fail to get the interventions they need. Despite requiring specialist palliative care, over 100,000 people received none. Demand is rising, and will grow by 42% in a decade. Where someone dies, on what day or at what time determines the care that they receive. Some 42% of all deaths occurred in hospital, 28% at home, 21% in care homes, 5% in hospices and 4% in other settings, such as prisons. According to Sue Ryder, just 50% died in the place of their choosing.

I have had the sheer privilege of working with leading academics and clinicians, health leaders, international experts, charities and people with lived experience, in establishing, with Baroness Finley, the independent commission on palliative and end-of-life care, which is chaired by Professor Sir Mike Richards. We sought solutions to establish equitable access to high-quality palliative and specialist palliative care. I am beyond grateful; I have been inspired and I have learned much.

I am also indebted to Professor Fliss Murtagh from the Wolfson Palliative Care Research Centre at the University of Hull. I make particular mention of Professors

Katherine Sleeman and Irene Higginson of King's College London; Oxford consultant Professor Bee Wee; Hospice UK; Marie Curie; Sue Ryder; the Association for Palliative Medicine; Together for Short Lives; my local hospice, St Leonard's; and so many more. We held 10 evidence sessions and eight roundtables, received 506 written submissions from experts, and spoke to 129 witnesses. We then presented our report to the Minister.

Now that the Government have progressed to the modern service framework, they must commission a single pathway across all settings, focused on excellence, crisis prevention and investing in the community. We found that early identification for access to high-quality specialist interventions was transformative for patients. At the point of terminal diagnosis or increasing frailty, a serious illness conversation undertaken by well-trained clinicians—as recommended by Professor Sir Chris Whitty—injects an honest understanding to ensure the best patient-centred care, while capturing the patient's wider social needs, priorities and goals. It facilitates good clinical planning. Co-produced, personalised and optimal care is supported with palliative medicine.

In York, the frailty hub brings all sectors, clinicians and services together. When that is intersected with palliative care, crisis admissions are avoided. Emergency services do not escalate without cause; rather, medicine integrates with the hospice at home team—one team, one set of records, one plan. Avoiding the need for crisis management avoids distress. In the last three months of life, however, almost half of people visited their emergency department, and one in eight spent more than 30 days in hospital. Placing palliative care professionals in emergency departments furthers the model, and allows patients to be triaged to the right service. Clinicians at the back door discharge into community palliative care teams. On the wards, hospital specialists connect with patients, introduce palliative care where appropriate, and seek to discharge to the community, hospice or special hospital unit, reducing hospital deaths and improving disease management.

As our bodies fail, high-stakes interventions add little to the quality or quantity of life, yet they carry risk—as do hospital stays—through infection, deconditioning and disorientation. In a far cry from what happened on the Liverpool care pathway, the focus is on enhancing life, not hastening death.

GPs have a significant role, and I ask the Minister to review the retiring of the palliative care register, which focuses GPs on identifying patients for palliation early, so that interventions can be considered. Can she set out how she will still achieve those aims? People are identified far too late for palliative support—just 56 days prior to death for cancer, and 27 days for non-malignant disease, like respiratory, neurological, renal or cardiac disease. Those with conditions like dementia are rarely ever referred.

While there has been a move away from prognostication of life expectancy, due to its unreliability and often significant inaccuracy, recognition of palliative needs early is key. Marie Curie's "Better End of Life 2024" report identified that 40% of families had no conversation about deterioration or possible death; 20% were alerted in the last three months of life, and 15% in the last week. Its report, "Measuring unmet need for palliative care", highlighted that one in three people do not receive specialist care. Its post-bereavement survey in

[*Rachael Maskell*]

2024 showed a doubling of unmet need, compared with the 2015 VOICES—views of informal carers: evaluation of services—post-bereavement survey by the Office for National Statistics, which should be reintroduced. That highlights the fact that there is higher demand and poorer access.

Furthermore, we know that those from low socio-economic and ethnic minoritised communities are significantly disadvantaged, and face late identification of needs and poor palliative care access. Without agency and advocacy, outcomes are worse, and that is also the case for those with physical and intellectual disabilities. Such injustice demands change.

Variation exists across integrated care boards. The responses to Hospice UK's freedom of information requests showed that spend ranged from just 23p to £10.33 per person. The National Audit Office's report on this subject shows the inequity, too; figures range from one hospice bed per 2,900 patients to one per 54,300, yet provision is mandated by the Health and Care Act 2022. At night and over weekends, 75% of the time, the availability of advice and interventions available to relieve distress, difficulties and discomfort is inconsistent, although 24/7 services are needed. By day, a single point of contact is essential, as the Association for Palliative Medicine has impressed upon me.

Specialist palliative care from highly trained professionals must be commissioned to manage complex pain and symptoms through effective drug titration and interventions like palliative radiotherapy, nerve blocks and neuromodulation, which are often not available. The commission advised rapid escalation of complex cases to specialists, to improve outcomes across all settings. Psychological support is pivotal, yet only 19% of hospices can access clinical psychology. Early assessments can palliate depression or anxiety and their consequences.

Young people with life-limiting and life-threatening illnesses must have equal access to care. Paediatric palliative care differs from adult care but is as ambitious in driving excellence. Tailored, age-appropriate care is needed, and expert parents need recognition for their advocacy, too. I particularly note the concerns about transition into adult services; special attention is needed to get that right.

I turn to training. Family carers provide £28.7 billion-worth of care annually. They need training and support, to be listened to, and, above all, space to love, be and spend time. In addition to training and accreditation of the whole palliative health and social care workforce in domiciliary and residential settings, hospices and hospitals, we need a workforce plan for the whole pathway. All undergraduate programmes must have palliative care content. Specialist training to support GPs aspiring to consultant status needs dual accreditation, and the commission heard that overseas-trained staff need specific orientation to palliative medicine, as each jurisdiction approaches death differently. Across the whole service, we need high standards and united objectives.

In 2024, the cost of dying in England was £24,222. The total for England was £12.8 billion, and 78% of that was spent in hospital settings. By contrast, just £1,017 is spent per person on specialist palliative provision, and £862 on community nursing. Research published today shows that specialist palliative care can save the

NHS £7,908 per patient when delivered at home, and £6,480 per patient in hospital. That would save around 1.5 million bed days, or £817 million. Funding for hospice provision—essential healthcare—can no longer depend on bake sales and parachute jumps. Two in five hospices are making cuts, and 380 beds have been lost in a year, according to Hospice UK. Staff reductions and redundancies have occurred. Paediatric palliative care faces a £310 million shortfall, and there has been an overreliance on charitable funding, which is inherently inequitable.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): The hon. Member is making such a powerful speech. I wish to draw attention to Princess Alice hospice in my constituency. It receives 20% of its funding from the Government, and the rest through selling woolly jumpers. Most constituents are not aware of this, but the hospice says that it can provide only a quarter of the provision that is needed in Esher and Walton because of the state of its funding. Does the hon. Member agree that the situation needs to change, not least if we are to make things equitable for everybody in our society?

Rachael Maskell: The hon. Member makes such a powerful case. We are talking about essential medicine. We would not do this in any other field of medicine, yet we are dependent on charities, which do phenomenal work to fund essential healthcare. We must ensure that we fund it properly. I will come on to make a few suggestions about that.

Although I recognise the dedication of St. Leonard's hospice in my constituency, and the whole community around it in York, which is both generous and caring, it receives less than 24% NHS funding. This year, it got just a 2% uplift from the integrated care board. To invest in equipping it, in staffing in the community, and in building the capacity to meet need, funding will be needed, and there is already a significant shortfall. Without that funding, transition will slow and the model will fail. The sector agrees. ICBs have no transition funding, and without a health transformation fund, how will the Minister be able to deliver proper care for everyone? If patients are moving into domiciliary or hospice settings, funding should follow. Clinical staff, pharma, capital, utilities, and other essential costs should be covered by the NHS, since patients are now transferred from secondary care into the community. The modern service framework is due for publication in a matter of months, and implementation is due in April 2027. It requires a strong framework of accountability and governance, and it would be helpful for the Minister to set out how the MSF will be evaluated, and how outcomes will be measured.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on the work that she has done on this issue. Two hospices serve my constituency—Lindsey Lodge in Scunthorpe, and St Andrew's in Grimsby—and the percentage of funding that they get through the NHS, as opposed to from charity, varies dramatically. Does she agree that, at very least, we must regularise the proportion of funding that hospices receive from the Government?

Rachael Maskell: The hon. Member is right, and we know how much palliative care, including specialist palliative care, costs. That must be built into the

commissioning process at population level, so that we see equity. I am sure that many in his constituency will see certain demographics in his community excluded from being able to access that specialist care. We must drive the model, and if we do not have the funding, resources or staffing, it will be very difficult to deliver the comprehensive service that everybody deserves at the end of life, should they need palliative care.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): I am sure the whole House congratulates the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) on her immense work on this topic—I certainly do. I am sure that she would sympathise with one of my constituents, whose case was brought to my attention by Marie Curie. The lack of a doctor on duty over a weekend meant that proper palliating medicine could not be prescribed, resulting in a distressing death. Does she agree that as well as consistency in funding, we need care to be consistently available seven days a week and 24 hours a day?

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful to the hon. Member for raising 24/7 provision, and provision in the evenings and at weekends. Research shows that only a small proportion of services are available at those times and access to them is inequitable across the country. We need to ensure that a specialist is available at the end of the phone to support clinicians, family members and patients themselves, and that we have the workforce available to come out to deliver changes to medication or an escalation in care. It is crucial that this is not a nine-to-five service, but a 24/7 service.

Finally, I want to mention bereavement. Bereavement support varies and is often underfunded, if funded at all. Grief costs the economy £23 billion a year, but it costs individuals far more. It can be complex and have a profound impact, especially on children. It is vital that we commission appropriate bereavement support, including counselling and, for some, social prescribing.

In conclusion, palliative care affirms life and regards death as a normal process. It neither hastens nor postpones death. However, to date, access to palliative care has been inequitable. This debate must be a catalyst to providing outstanding care. Our ambition must go beyond the modern service framework. Our duty is to secure excellence in life, until the final breath is taken.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. If Members confine their remarks to five or six minutes, we will get everybody in, but I do not intend to introduce a formal time limit yet.

3.16 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) most warmly on her exemplary record in campaigning for better palliative care. I will address just one segment of her panoramic presentation, namely the work done by the charity that she briefly mentioned, Together for Short Lives. It provided me with a detailed briefing and I apologise in advance if I make some points that others, who may have received the same briefing, anticipate making.

Children's palliative care enables babies, children and young people with life-limiting conditions, life-shortening conditions or severe medical complexity to live as well as possible until they die. Palliative care for children and young people is defined by the charity as

"an active and total approach to care, from the point of diagnosis throughout the child's life, death and beyond."

By embracing physical, emotional, social and spiritual elements, children's palliative care helps to achieve the best possible quality of life and care for every child with a life-limiting or life-threatening condition and their family.

Giving families an opportunity to set out what they need and want is key to this approach. Children's palliative care is holistic and is provided by a network of services in hospitals, homes and children's hospices by the NHS and the voluntary sector, including children's hospices. These services should be planned, funded and provided in a way that enables children and families to access them when and where they need them.

The key problem is the one that I am about to set out:

"In England, integrated care boards have a legal duty to commission palliative care for children, young people and adults that it considers necessary.

Across England and the wider UK, there is huge variance in the extent to which palliative and end of life care for seriously ill children and young people is being formally planned, funded and provided in ways that meet national and regional standards.

Of particular concern is children and families' access to end of life care at home"—

we heard this from the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos)—

"24 hours a day, seven days a week, provided by nurses and supported by advice from consultant paediatricians who have completed sub-specialty training in paediatric palliative medicine (also known as GRID training).

Despite some improvements, freedom of information...requests published in March 2025 have revealed that less than a fifth...of ICBs currently commission these services on a formal basis. Meanwhile, over a third...are still failing to meet this established national standard.

As a result, many families feel abandoned by a complex system which should support them to provide care once their child is diagnosed."

I have been asked by the charity to raise a rather large number of questions, which I am going to cut down to just six, if I can manage to squeeze them in. The charity stresses the fact that the Government's decision to allocate up to £80 million in ringfenced NHS funding for children's hospices in England over the next three years is very welcome, but many challenges remain.

These are the six questions that I have picked out of more than a dozen and a half that I was presented with. First, will the Minister confirm that the modern service framework for palliative and end-of-life care, which we heard about from the hon. Member for York Central, will explicitly acknowledge the difference between adult and children's palliative care and ensure that the needs of seriously ill children are not overlooked?

Secondly, can the Minister confirm that the framework will take a holistic approach and address the wide-ranging needs of seriously ill children and their families, including medical, emotional, social, psychological and practical needs?

Thirdly, will the Minister commit to using the upcoming 10-year workforce plan to examine how the existing children's palliative care workforce can be used as equitably

[*Sir Julian Lewis*]

as possible, organising services into NHS-commissioned children's palliative care operational delivery networks, such as I gather are used in neonatal care services, in order to help to achieve that?

Fourthly, can the Minister commit to increasing investment in specialist paediatric palliative medicine training by £2.4 million annually to address the funding gap identified by the charity Together for Short Lives?

Fifthly, do the Government support the call of the Royal College of Nursing for nurse-to-patient ratios in all health and care settings? Will they commit to tackling the shortage in NHS community children's nurses?

Finally, with ICB funding for children's hospices varying significantly across England, how is the Minister ensuring that every seriously ill child and their family, regardless of where they live, has equitable access to palliative care?

3.23 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): Palliative and end-of-life care is one of the clearest tests of a health and care system. It is about whether people can live their final months, weeks or days with dignity, comfort and choice, and whether families are supported, rather than left to cope alone. It should never be a lottery, yet too often people still experience palliative care as something that arrives too late in a crisis and only after families have reached breaking point. Referrals are delayed, honest conversations are postponed and advance care plans are created at the point when somebody is already too unwell to meaningfully shape them. Families describe repeating the same story to multiple professionals, not knowing who to call at 10 pm on a Sunday evening, and watching distress escalate because there is no rapid response available. That is not what a compassionate system looks like.

I will make three substantive points. First, we must confront the reality of variation and fragmentation. Access to specialist palliative care, hospice-at-home services and community nursing support still vary widely between integrated care boards. In some areas, there is a reliable 24/7 advice line and rapid response within hours. In others, support is limited, particularly out of hours, and families are told to ring 111 or attend A&E.

Funding arrangements contribute to that variation. Adult hospices, which provide extraordinary care, still rely heavily on charitable fundraising, alongside NHS funding. The balance differs significantly between areas, which creates instability and inequity. Hospices such as St Cuthbert's hospice in Durham do remarkable work supporting patients and families across our community, but like many hospices it remains heavily dependent on charitable fundraising. St Cuthbert's has recently had to make difficult decisions, including on redundancies and reducing dementia services, as funding pressures grow. At the same time, much of the Government's announced support has been directed towards buildings and capital investment, at a time when hospices and organisations such as Hospice UK have repeatedly warned that the real pressure is on staffing and day-to-day service delivery. If we are serious about reducing health inequalities, we cannot accept such stark differences in something as fundamental as end-of-life care.

Secondly, palliative care is not simply about the last days of life; it is about quality of life from the point of diagnosis of a life-limiting condition. Early specialist input can provide for symptom control, reduce unplanned hospital admissions and help people to make informed choices about where and how they wish to be cared for. That is why I welcome the emphasis in the NHS 10-year plan on shifting care away from hospitals and into the community, because for many people facing serious illness, the most compassionate and effective care is delivered at home or close to home, supported by community teams.

Thirdly, there are practical steps that the Government can and should take. We need a clear, fully articulated national strategy for palliative and end-of-life care, with measurable standards and transparent reporting. Every area should be required to demonstrate that it provides equitable access to specialist advice, rapid response and co-ordinated care planning, so that the ambitions set out in the 10-year plan to strengthen community-based care are genuinely realised for people at the end of life. We should move towards a model where every part of the country has guaranteed 24/7 access to specialist palliative care advice, backed by community capacity to respond quickly when symptoms escalate.

Workforce is central. Generalist staff in primary care, acute hospitals, community services and social care must feel confident in recognising when someone is deteriorating, in managing pain and other distressing symptoms, and in initiating compassionate conversations. That requires investment, training and protected time, not simply guidance on paper. We must also recognise that hospice and social care services rely on the contributions of migrant workers. Recent changes to visa rules and the right to remain are making recruitment and retention even more difficult, at a time when these services are already under immense pressure.

We must not forget the strain on hospice care for children, as the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) said. Provision in this area remains uneven, and the stakes are extraordinarily high. Recent campaigning on Hugh's law has also highlighted the importance of ensuring that families caring for seriously ill children are properly supported and not left navigating complicated systems while dealing with unimaginable circumstances.

Debates on assisted dying are now taking place in this Parliament. I am clear in my opposition to that proposal. I believe that the foundation of a compassionate society must be strong, universal access to high-quality palliative care and end-of-life care. When people are properly supported, when pain is managed, when families are helped and when the highest standard of care is available close to home, the fear and desperation that often drive these debates are significantly reduced. If assisted dying were to become available on the NHS, it would raise important questions that are already being asked by professionals in palliative care and across the health system about our priorities for healthcare. Access to compassionate and properly resourced end-of-life care should never become the secondary option. I ask the Minister to set out how the Government will reduce the postcode variation, strengthen community and out-of-hours provision, provide stable funding frameworks—particularly for hospices—and ensure that workforce development is prioritised.

This is not an abstract policy area. It is about whether, at the most vulnerable point in someone's life, the system is fragmented and reactive or calm, co-ordinated and compassionate. We owe it to patients and their families to get this right.

3.30 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for securing this vital debate. Her knowledge, understanding and compassion for people are outstanding and cannot be matched.

Most people, when they are seriously ill, want to be at home, surrounded by the people who love them and whom they love. I know this personally from my own family's experience. When my mother was dying, we were told that she had only a short time to live. She lived for another 22 days. During those 22 days, her hand was never left unheld by one of her children. Not once was she left alone. We laughed and talked, and we were able to be there with her. That experience stayed with me and all my family, and we treasure it.

However, not everyone has that support. Some people reach the end of life alone, and we have a duty as a society to care for them too. That is one of the reasons I helped to establish the Willowbrook hospice in St Helens. Like many hospices, Willowbrook was created by the community itself. It was founded in 1993 by people who, like me, believed that families in our area deserved the same compassionate end-of-life care as those anywhere else. Today it is a wonderful place, with beautiful surroundings and gardens, and care that focuses on comfort, dignity, compassion, and people's family and friends. It is rated outstanding by the Cheshire and Merseyside ICB, and provides short-term in-patient care for people with complex needs, alongside outreach, outpatient care, therapy and education services. The hospice has supported more than 10,000 patients since opening its doors, and it now receives over 1,000 referrals each year.

Hospices exist to care for the individual person and their family. They give people a choice about where and how they spend the final part of their lives. They allow people to be treated not simply as patients, but as people—surrounded by family and friends, supported with compassion and dignity, and cared for in a way that recognises the humanity of those at the end of life. However, the reality is that, as charities, hospices are under enormous financial pressure.

At Willowbrook, around 30% of funding comes from the ICB; the remaining 70% must be raised locally. That comes from 10 charity shops in St Helens and Knowsley, donations, the occasional legacy gift and, of course, sponsored walks. It costs £3.8 million each year to run the in-patient unit alone. In a community that is not particularly affluent, raising that level of funding year after year is incredibly challenging. The hospice is currently facing a large deficit. If this pattern continues, it could be forced to close within five years. The annual increase from the ICB was 2.2% last year and is 2.3% this year, but it is dependent on efficiency savings. The increases do not keep pace with inflation and are confirmed to the hospice partway through the year, which is very late, forcing it to set its budget without certainty. In truth, it is operating on a knife edge. The solution must be fairer funding.

Patients who are medically fit for discharge, but who have no care package available at home, will be told that they do not meet the criteria for residing in a hospital, which is there for patients receiving treatment. Not many people know this until they get to that stage. There is no ready solution for people at the end of their lives if they are not receiving treatment in hospital or at home. We need funding for Willowbrook because it cannot meet the NHS nursing pay awards and is losing staff to NHS employers that can offer higher salaries, yet it is delivering NHS-commissioned care. The funding must reflect that reality, and it should pay NHS rates for hospice staff.

However, we also need wider reform. The Government must get down to facing our end-of-life care crisis. It is not good enough to finance existing hospices, although such finance is needed, because a holistic infrastructure must be developed. Hospices are established only where individuals have developed them; they are not equally distributed everywhere. That means we need a clear national strategy for end-of-life and palliative care, including a national service framework; better data to understand where care is needed most; clear goals for improvement; and proper palliative training and resources for health and palliative care staff.

Hospices such as Willowbrook show what compassion and end-of-life care can look like. Many people want that at home, and as I know, it can be provided at home, but without sustainable funding and a coherent national approach, such a service cannot continue to do the extraordinary work that so many families depend on and that the staff in nursing homes and hospices provide.

3.36 pm

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for calling this vital debate.

As the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) did, I will talk about children, and I would like to start with Amy. Amy had Cockayne syndrome, which is a severe, fatal, multi-organ genetic disease. She lived with it for 28 years, and for much of that time her family felt utterly lost. They were navigating a health system that simply did not know how to help them. What changed everything for her was a specialist NHS clinical service, where she got a co-ordinated team who understood her condition. They knew her, and they became a genuine lifeline.

I met Amy's wonderful mother, Jayne, and sister Louise on Monday at a rare disease day at St Thomas' hospital, just across the river. I must thank Dr Shehla Mohammed and the Rare Disease UK team, including Dr Bob Sarkany, for a truly inspiring visit. Jayne told me when I met her that, if this specialist service had existed for Amy when she was diagnosed at the age of 14, so much would have been different and so much would have been easier.

Amy's condition was rare, but her experience was not. Right now, there are 99,000 children in this country—babies, toddlers, teenagers—who are living with life-limiting or life-threatening conditions. Their families are navigating the same fear, the same confusion and the same desperate need for someone to show up and know what to do, but too often what they need just is not there.

[Ben Coleman]

We have recently been talking in this House about the Government's very welcome new special educational needs and disabilities strategy, which promises to end the battles that disabled children and their parents face to get the support they need. That is exactly right, but it must apply equally to palliative care.

What does that support look like? This was mentioned by the right hon. Member for New Forest East. Children's palliative care is not just about death or bereavement; it runs from diagnosis to the end of life. Sometimes, it runs from birth to early adulthood and beyond, and, yes, to bereavement. However, it is not about giving up. It is about making sure that, however long a child has, and it may be many years, they can live their life and their families can live their lives as well as possible.

The rare diseases centre at St Thomas' hospital showed me what is possible when we get this right. It calls its multidisciplinary clinic a carousel, which is a nice word. It means that patients see every specialist they need in one appointment, rather than having to travel across the country trailing from hospital to hospital over months. That is great when it exists, but the problem is that, as has been said, children's palliative care is planned, funded and provided inconsistently across the country.

That was confirmed by a report of the independent expert panel's "Evaluation of Palliative care in England", published last November. It was commissioned by the Health and Social Care Committee, of which I have the honour to be a member, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton). The report cites Together for Short Lives, which is the leading charity supporting seriously ill children and their families. It told the panel that more than a quarter of families today feel poorly supported, and that nearly one in 10 families feel altogether unsupported. In addition, only a third of existing paediatric palliative care teams are properly staffed, despite the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidance on staffing. The Government response to the report is encouraging. It commits to the modern service framework for palliative care and acknowledges that they must improve services for children. It will come as no surprise to the Minister that I and the Select Committee will be holding the Government to that, as we will integrated care boards across the country.

Within services for children who need palliative care, children's hospices stand out as a beacon of what can be achieved. They are absolutely irreplaceable. They provide specialist nursing, symptom management, short breaks for exhausted families, and emotional and bereavement support. I hugely welcome the £80 million that the Government have given to children's hospices over the next three years, so that they can plan ahead more easily, but hospices are scattered geographically. Most families access palliative care through the NHS, which is not providing this care consistently.

What needs to improve? I suggest that five things need to improve so that people get what they need, where they need it. First, we need 24/7 care. At the moment, families are alone at 2 in the morning and they do not know who to call. There have been pilots where hospices and NHS services work together to provide round-the-clock care at home, so it can be done. The NHS needs to adopt that model. Secondly, we have

workforce issues. There are shortages of specialist nurses in paediatric palliative care and of properly trained generalists. That is a systemic problem, so I look forward to the NHS workforce plan, which I hope will specifically address children's palliative care.

Thirdly, we need to consider neonatal palliative care. Neonatal deaths account for 41% of all childhood deaths. Just before Christmas, I had the unforgettable experience of visiting the neonatal unit at Chelsea and Westminster hospital in my constituency. Since 2015, it has run a most extraordinary national neonatal palliative care programme. It is on track to have trained every neonatal network in the UK from Chelsea and Westminster hospital by 2029. There has been a remarkable partnership at the unit between the NHS, the True Colours Trust and CW+, which is the hospital's charity. I want the NHS to keep going with that.

Fourthly, we have patient groups. Their work, together with the NHS, can be life-saving. They need to be recognised and funded. Finally, as NHS England is abolished, we need to protect the roughly 80 highly specialised services on which the rarest and most complex cases depend. When NHS England goes, we need a national commissioner with the authority to fund these services nationally and to step in when local pressures threaten them.

I have set out a number of good examples, and there is real proof of what can work when the system wraps around families. Amy did not get that from the start. Jayne told me how different things could have been if she had. In future, I hope that we can make sure that every Amy—every one of those 99,000 children—gets the palliative care that they need.

3.43 pm

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who I love dearly, for leading this important debate. Palliative care is about dignity. I saw the value of this care every day during my 25 years as a nurse in the health service. I still see it now in representing my constituency, particularly through the experience of John Taylor hospice, which is now part of Birmingham hospice. John Taylor hospice is a beacon of compassion. My constituents tell me consistently how the hospice supported them and their loved ones through the most difficult moments of their lives. But like so many hospices across the country, it is a charity, heavily dependent on voluntary contributions, and when donations dry up, it is patients and families who pay the price. Despite providing an outstanding service in 2024, John Taylor hospice was forced to reduce in-patient beds and cut the equivalent of 45 full-time roles—14% of its workforce. That means losing specialist nurses; it means losing the staff who hold the hands of the dying. That is the human cost of financial uncertainty.

I welcome the Government's recent funding of £100 million in capital for hospices and the £26 million per year for children's palliative care, and I am glad Birmingham hospice has successfully accessed over £1.1 million from that funding, but we must be honest with ourselves: a one-off grant is simply a short-term sticking plaster. Palliative care cannot survive on a diet of gap-filling and bake sales. It cannot be sustained by charity alone.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Can I take my hon. Friend up the M6 from Birmingham to Newcastle-under-Lyme and, through her, pay tribute to the wonderful Dougie Mac hospice? For many years, it has served people in Newcastle-under-Lyme, Stoke-on-Trent and across north Staffordshire. The staff there are committed, caring and compassionate, and they deserve a shout-out in this debate.

Paulette Hamilton: I am sure that every Member in the Chamber has a local hospice that they really appreciate and cannot do without. I thank my hon. Friend for giving his local hospice a shout-out. I am sure it will be appreciated.

Palliative care is a core medical need and it requires core funding. Let us look at the numbers. It is estimated that in England and Wales, by 2040, demand for palliative care is expected to increase by between 25% and 47%. We are heading towards a cliff edge, yet we are funding these services as if they are an optional extra. We must ensure that hospices receive proper, recurring funding from the NHS and the Government. Staff must be retained and patients must have equitable access to care. We need a long-term financial strategy so that no family, in Birmingham Erdington or anywhere else in this country, suffers because services are cut back.

We must also talk about access. Just as we have seen with GP appointments, accessing hospice care is becoming harder. If we cut beds and staff, we close the door on dignity. That brings me to the assisted dying Bill. I am concerned that it is not clear where the funding for the proposed new system will come from. If it is drawn from the same limited pot as palliative care, we risk starving the very services that provide the positive alternative: a death free from suffering. We need to close the door on that dilemma. We need hospices embedded not as a charitable extra, but as core partners in the NHS: funded for the long term and resourced to be there for everyone. The people of Birmingham Erdington and across the country deserve to live and die with dignity.

3.48 pm

Tom Collins (Worcester) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for leading on this topic.

I have seen palliative care fail. My mum, Alison, had ovarian cancer. She died lonely and in dreadful indignity in a hospital ward intended for recovering liver and kidney patients. She felt a burden to a nursing team who were used to people getting better. She was waiting for a hospice bed, but, as it turned out, the waiting time was longer than she had.

In my constituency, we have hospices with superb facilities. Both Acorns children's hospice and St Richard's hospice are beloved institutions in our city, but they are struggling and it is vital that we support them. Clearly, we need more hospice capacity, but the deficiencies in palliative care are vast, and my lurking, uneasy suspicion is that many of them are not hospice-shaped, but reflect deeper deficits across our NHS.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): My hon. Friend raises an important point about the NHS. In my limited but painful experience of hospices, one problem is that even when there is a hospice bed available, NHS staff do

not refer end-of-life patients to the hospice because the palliative team is 9 to 5, Monday to Friday. Does he agree that we have to get to a point where palliative support in our NHS is available 24/7 so that those referrals can take place?

Tom Collins: My hon. Friend is entirely right. We need far better integration across those services. I was heartbroken to see that the palliative care that my mother was receiving seemed to have been outsourced to charities, and was not being provided by the NHS at all. That specialist care ought to be something that is native to our NHS.

I was recently talking to a couple of GPs in Worcester. Speaking with them is a refreshing change. While their work is in diagnosing and treating illness and, to a good extent, preventing it and promoting healthy lives, for them, palliative care is not an exception; it's a Monday. With an ageing population, end-of-life care is really an emerging flavour in medical care. Bodies do not last forever, and the balance of benefits of treatment versus the very human costs of pain, inconvenience and indignity starts to change.

Medics dealing with palliative care understand that our bodies are intermingled, complex systems, and that they are one part of what we are: complex, intermingled physical, psychological, social and spiritual beings with rich tapestries of relationships, values, perspectives and experiences. "See the problem, name the problem, fix the problem" just does not cut it as an approach. We must treat the whole person, or we risk mistreating them. Sadly, our urgent and acute systems of diagnosis and treatment are simply not designed for this approach. Palliative care is by and large out of mind and out of scope. Care is siloed into specialties, patients become units of flow and relationships are substituted out for transactions.

This is reflected in the stories I hear from constituents in Worcester: stories from people with multiple complex conditions who are locked in the flip-flop between specialisms, where alternately one gets managed well and the other slips into neglect; stories of people who feel unheard, unvalued and anonymously shipped to different hospitals in different areas under different trusts; and stories of people who, when their wellness takes a dip, do everything they can to avoid calling an ambulance and the inevitable prodding, poking and a long, cold night in A&E corridors that follows. This has to change.

Addressing our gaps in palliative care demands a fundamental shift in the way our NHS thinks and works. Here and there, there will be a place for the cut-and-shut quick surgical procedure, a course of antibiotics, or a cast, a sling and a suggestion not to do it again, but the primary role of healthcare needs to be one that sees the human being and works in relationship for their wellbeing. In fact, best practice in palliative care is often remarkably similar to treatment for recovery: setting small, achievable goals and working with patients to fulfil them. An NHS informed by this approach would most likely be more effective across the board. With that foundation, the opportunities for a better, more holistic and properly resourced approach to palliative care can start to open up.

I would like to touch on the topic of assisted dying. I found debate on the Bill difficult to navigate, largely for the reasons I have discussed. The overwhelming message I have heard from medical professionals is that

[Tom Collins]

we need to improve the way we navigate the end of life as things stand today, break the taboo of death and develop care that meets the practical, physical, psychological, spiritual and social needs of patients and their families, and make that available to all.

As we do that, treatments that shorten but enhance life would undoubtedly play a role, but they must sit at the apex of a well-developed practice in end-of-life care that we do not yet have. This should be a major and urgent priority for us, not least because the drive towards excellent palliative care can only improve our systems and approaches overall, enabling us to deal better with complex needs, putting patients' perspectives at the centre of system design, and plugging gaps so that patients are no longer able to fall through them. By taking proper ownership of palliative care, we can end experiences like my mum's, and in doing so, we will also make a better NHS.

3.54 pm

Mary Glendon (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): I am very sorry to hear about the mother of my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Tom Collins).

This is a topic of deep personal importance to me, to many of us in the Chamber and to many of our constituents, but it took a private Member's Bill on assisted dying to bring the debate on palliative care into the foreground. I am relieved that the subject is now getting the attention that it deserves, but this has been needed for far too long.

Let me take this opportunity to commend in the strongest possible terms my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). She rose to meet the challenge and convened the brightest minds in their respective fields to think about how palliative care could be done differently; I thank her. To say that was a necessity is no overstatement. New research commissioned by Marie Curie shows that almost one in three dying people have unaddressed symptoms and concerns, and limited or no access to GP services. This is a system in crisis, and demand for specialist palliative care is set to increase significantly. People in the UK are living longer, with complex needs, and this is a mounting pressure on services that are already patchy and under strain.

According to a widely cited study published in *BMC Medicine*, the demand for specialist palliative care services could increase by 42% by 2040. For those who access specialist palliative care, a referral can be an incredibly daunting experience. People are forced to stare their life-limiting illness directly in the face. Patients often take each day as it comes, and before they know it, they face forms and terminology that they have never encountered before.

I welcome the Government's commitment to develop a palliative care and end-of-life care modern service framework. This will be the first such national plan in two decades. As part of the strategy, I hope the Minister will look closely at the practical support provided to patients and families as they navigate referral. It can be a minefield, and people must feel confident that their care plan is right for them.

I hope the Government will seize the opportunities of the forthcoming NHS workforce plan. The sharp rise in demand that lies ahead of us must be met by a resilient

and comprehensive workforce. Making the shift from hospital to community will require investment in general practice, community and district nursing, and specialist palliative care professionals. I would be grateful if the Minister could set out whether palliative care services will be a key component of the workforce plan.

The Commission on Palliative and End of Life Care underlines the hard yards that we need to do on training. It highlights that a

“lack of training available to clinicians in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes”

is leading to

“poor confidence and competencies...in knowing how best to engage in care planning conversations.”

It is crucial to note that it is not just specialists who have a vital role to play; palliative and end-of-life care must become a compulsory part of training for all health and social care workers.

Greater health literacy in this area would also improve earlier identification. This would not only improve outcomes for patients, but reduce costs for our broader health system. Given these clear opportunities, will the Minister commit to implementing mandatory training for all health and social care staff in undergraduate programmes from September 2026? Will she also commit to ongoing and specialist-level training for those already part of our NHS workforce? We must thank all those who currently work in the palliative care world. Their work is nothing short of awesome.

I wish to end my speech with a reflection on what our overarching focus must be. A person is never more vulnerable than when they are told that their life will come to an end. When that happens—when nature makes that choice—we must enable people to maximise the precious time that they have left. Today, too many people are not afforded the opportunity to do that. I urge the Government to be bold as they set a new direction for palliative and end-of-life care.

3.59 pm

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for securing this debate. Discussions around assisted dying have divided this House, yet I think we can all agree that the prominence that palliative care has been given as a result is incredibly welcome. Before I discuss policy and funding, I repeat the words of Dame Cicely Saunders, the founder of the modern hospice movement, who said that palliative care is about more than just bricks and mortar.

Many of the benefits of proper palliative care and hospice support are not easily quantified, and certainly cannot be captured on a balance sheet. At St Christopher's hospice in my constituency, established by Dame Cicely, there is a real focus on living fully until the end of life, as well as on allowing time for spiritual reflection and reconciliation at the end of life. St Christopher's was the first modern hospice in the world for end-of-life patients that combined medical care, research and teaching. Every family in Beckenham and Penge has been touched by St Christopher's hospice. Speaking to them about the care that their loved ones received, I truly began to understand the meaning of holistic care.

To use just one example, patients are given access to a specialist adapted gym and physiotherapists, with a focus on retaining practical movements to maximise

quality of life. To give another example, St Christopher's invites out-patients into the hospice for art classes and therapies, providing them with community and enjoyment. It also ensures that the hospice is a familiar and safe place, meaning a more comfortable experience should they become an in-patient at the hospice in the future.

The care extends beyond patients to the families. St Christopher's offers bereavement support to families after a death, and encourages conversations towards the end of life that facilitate reconciliation, honesty and peace. The impact of St Christopher's hospice can be seen in the enthusiasm of our community for supporting the hospice at various fundraising events throughout the year.

It is so important that those benefits, as well as the savings that hospices can generate for the NHS, are recognised by the Government, but we know that recognition alone is not enough. The number of people with palliative care needs is projected to rise significantly over the next 25 years, putting more pressure on a system that is already squeezed. Marie Curie estimates that by 2048, the number of people with palliative care needs will be 25% higher than in 2023. We also have a postcode lottery for palliative care in this country. Because the hospice movement grew organically over the decades, locations were not planned with the aim of providing even access. Where a person lives should never determine the dignity of their death or their ability to access the support I described.

Even in one place, significant disparities exist between groups. The barriers to accessing care are unacceptably high for ethnic minority communities and those living in poverty. A lack of culturally tailored care, language barriers, and a historical disconnect between some communities and traditional hospice services mean that many families carry the burden of end-of-life care entirely alone, unaware of the holistic support that they are entitled to. We need providers and the Government to begin to address that.

I am glad that the Government have begun to relieve some of the problems. Last year, they announced record funding—a £100 million boost for adult and children's hospices, including £1.6 million for St Christopher's. This is the biggest investment in end-of-life care in a generation. It has enabled and supported the construction of the Nuffield ward at St Christopher's, which is the first of three wards to be refurbished. I was incredibly proud to visit the hospice in December, along with the Health Secretary, to officially open the ward.

I ask the Government to continue in the spirit of that recent success. As Steve Smith, chief executive of St Christopher's, said following the latest funding announcement,

"while this investment is deeply appreciated and has already helped modernise facilities, it cannot stand on its own. We must ensure the long-term sustainability of our hospice sector."

I therefore welcome the news that the Government are developing a palliative care and end-of-life care service framework for England. Unbelievably, it will be the first national plan for this vital area of care to be delivered since 2008.

From speaking to friends at St Christopher's and Hospice UK, I know that there is a real desire to engage with Ministers on shaping this vision. In order to meet the Government's ambitions in the 10-year health plan

to shift care out of hospitals and into the community, this framework must commit to a fairer long-term funding model.

Adam Jogee: My hon. Friend is making a really important speech, which I am enjoying, as I am sure others are. He set out the challenges facing the palliative care system. Does he agree that rather than proceeding with changes to bring in assisted dying—a change from zero to hero that would only make the challenges he set out worse—the resources, effort and time of civil servants, the NHS and all of us should be focused on getting the palliative care system fit for the 21st century?

Liam Conlon: I agree with my hon. Friend. When it comes to palliative care, a postcode lottery does not offer people a real choice, either; I made that point during the debate on assisted dying.

Crucially, the framework must also address the regional and socioeconomic inequalities that plague the system, so that across the whole country, people can access the high-quality, compassionate palliative care that I know my constituents value so dearly at St Christopher's.

Let me finish by thanking all the trustees, staff and volunteers at St Christopher's hospice for caring for families with unrivalled professionalism, dedication and empathy. Dame Cicely said:

"You matter because you are you, and you matter to the end of your life. We will do all we can not only to help you die peacefully, but also to live until you die."

She would be incredibly proud of the staff and volunteers at St Christopher's hospice today, whose work enables that to happen.

4.5 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for bringing the debate to the House, and for all the campaigning that she does. She is a force for getting palliative care the funding that it truly needs.

Laura and Keith Turner and their daughter Kate are at the heart of the community spirit that makes Sauchie such a special place. The Turners shared the story of their son, Kate's younger brother Calum, who was just 16 when diagnosed with Burkitt lymphoma. No family should face what the Turners did with Calum's illness.

When the Turners were told that no more could be done, Calum made the decision that he wanted to pass away somewhere familiar—at home. The family did everything they could to make Calum's final days comfortable and as peaceful as possible, but the Turners experienced a system designed for adults. District nurses and adult hospice services, dedicated as they are, are more equipped to care for elderly patients, not a 16-year-old boy. The sensitivity and understanding required for caring for a young person at that stage of life is very different from that required for caring for someone in their later years. While Calum had the bravery, attitude and confidence of an adult, he was still a child.

Traumatically, the Turners waited more than seven hours for morphine, and were negatively judged for taking the decision to bring Calum home, but that changed when Children's Hospices Across Scotland became involved. CHAS nurses brought dignity and understanding. They listened. They treated Calum as a

[Brian Leishman]

young person, not as a patient. Crucially, they allowed his family to stop being carers and simply be mum, dad and a loving sister in those precious final days.

Families deserve a system that recognises that young people at the end of life are individuals, with a unique set of needs. I ask the Minister to please listen to Calum's story and invest further in palliative care, so that other families do not find themselves in the same position as Laura, Keith and Kate. There is not a pounds-and-pence figure in any budget that can be put on giving families the best treatment and comfort possible at the time they need it most.

4.8 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for securing this debate and, more importantly, for her work and advocacy on palliative care throughout her time in the House. Last August, I visited St Giles hospice in Whittington, just over the border in the Lichfield constituency; I am hugely grateful for that visit. The hospice is so well loved by my constituents, not least by the thousands of people who fundraise for it every year.

We often judge our health services by how they treat illness, but the test of a good health service is also how it supports people when treatment is no longer the answer. The people I met at St Giles were doing extraordinary, skilled work. Their day-to-day is managing complex symptoms, while turning to steady a husband or reassure a daughter. That balance of clinical excellence and guiding family and friends as their loved one's life nears its end showcases the immense skill that those nurses, doctors and support staff possess.

At St Giles, I met the chief executive officer, Elinor Eustace, and saw the fruits of recent funding that they have had from the Government, and from the Francis and Eric Ford Charity Trust, which enabled them to create a new family lounge. The space gives people the chance to spend time with their loved ones away from their room, including cooking up a storm in the kitchen, nattering over a brew, or playing in the children's area—because, heartbreakingly, St Giles is seeing more and more terminally ill people who have young children.

Like all hospices, St Giles faces stark financial challenges. With only around a third of hospice funding coming from the NHS, the vast majority must be raised from donations, sponsorships and legacies. Though hospices fiercely defend their charitable mission and independence from the NHS, it is clear that the NHS and hospices have a close relationship, and always will, so public funding is critical.

Having listened to hospices and the families who have relied on their world-class care, it is clear to me that the funding model for palliative care, and the recognition of the costs that hospices face, need a major shake-up. At St Giles, Elinor told me that although hospices are not bound by NHS pay scales, terms and conditions, they have to keep up with them, or they will lose many of their staff. They want to recognise the outstanding care that their highly skilled workforce provide, but the reality is that the payments they receive from the NHS often do not keep pace with increasing costs; the squeeze

is tighter every year. It is the same story for many other hospices that serve my constituency, such as Acorns and the Dougie Mac.

A stark example of this pressure can be seen at St Giles, where a third of beds are closed due to funding constraints—most definitely not because of a lack of demand or need. In previous years, that spare capacity has been given over to the NHS to help with winter pressures. Any hon. Members who have worked in the NHS will know that extra capacity is essential in the cold winter months; however, the amount paid for lower-level care than St Giles typically offers meant that the hospice made a loss on those beds. Donations were effectively subsidising NHS care, so, sadly, that arrangement had to be stopped.

We Labour Members have to be honest that chief among the cost pressures faced by hospices in the last year has been the increase in employer national insurance contributions, which has cost St Giles £400,000. I continue to believe that given the vital role that hospices play for people at a critical time in life, and the pressures that they take off the NHS, hospices should be exempted from that increase. Not exempting them will continue to restrict the availability of end-of-life care, and will cost the NHS more in the long run.

Like many in the Chamber, I devoted lots of time to the assisted dying debate, poring over heart-wrenching letters, and speaking with constituents and professionals on both sides of the argument. That debate showed me that, whatever views people hold, we need far more focus, discussion and funding for care at the end of life. When hospices have to cut their services, the people who need them do not just disappear; instead, they go to the NHS, or they are among the quarter of people who could benefit from specialist end-of-life care but never receive it.

With stable long-term funding that reflects the full costs of specialist services, hospices could not only maintain their services, but expand their role to meet growing demand and the various challenges ahead of us. We all deserve a good death, but many of us do not get that. That must and can change, and I look forward to working with everyone in this Chamber, and with the incredible people who provide palliative care, to ensure that it does.

4.13 pm

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): The hospice sector in Scotland is under severe and growing financial pressure, with two thirds of hospices making cuts or planning to do so in the near future. That is due to underfunding that has left hospices stretched to breaking point; many are forced to cut services at a time when they are needed more than ever. Nowhere is that reality clearer than in my constituency of West Dunbartonshire, which is home to Scotland's oldest and largest hospice, St Margaret of Scotland Hospice, as well as CHAS Robin House, which provides specialist care to babies, children and young people with life-limiting conditions.

I note the findings of the independent palliative care commission, and I strongly support its call for a comprehensive, specialist palliative care service that is properly funded, accessible to all and available from the point of terminal diagnosis or advanced chronic illness. That vision reflects what families in my constituency need and deserve.

St Margaret's has served generations of families in West Dunbartonshire and beyond, and I am grateful for the formidable and irreplaceable stewardship of Sister Rita Dawson and her team of wonderful staff and volunteers. It is undertaking a £6 million refurbishment, and the work is almost complete, but there remains a funding shortfall. So far, all the money has been raised through donations and fundraising efforts. Modernisation is urgently needed to ensure that patients receive care in dignified therapeutic surroundings fit for the 21st century, yet the hospice continues to face a funding gap.

Robin House provides extraordinary children's palliative care to families facing the unimaginable. Its services embody precisely what the commission describes: holistic specialist care that extends beyond the patient to the whole family, including bereavement support. However, like adult hospices, it relies heavily on charitable income alongside statutory funding that does not always reflect the true cost of delivery.

I understand that the findings of the commission relate to England specifically and to the Government's 10-year NHS plan. I welcome the fact that the UK Government have committed significant investment to hospice and palliative care services in England as part of our long-term health planning. That funding recognises that palliative care is an essential part of our healthcare system for those receiving end-of-life care and their families. Having spoken to representatives from hospices in West Dunbartonshire, it is clear that there has been very little indication of the help that was promised under the Scottish Government's palliative care strategy announced last September.

Hospices in my constituency are struggling. They deserve clarity and transparency on where this much-needed funding is. West Dunbartonshire has some of the highest levels of health inequality in Scotland. That makes equitable access to specialist palliative care even more critical. A postcode should not determine the quality of someone's final months, nor should hospices be left dependent on community fundraising to complete essential building works while additional public funding sits somewhere else in devolved budgets.

Given the capital and revenue investment announced for palliative care in England, I ask the Minister whether she has held discussions with her Scottish counterpart to ensure that the Barnett consequentials are properly reflected in Scotland's approach to hospice funding. In particular, will the Scottish Government set aside their Barnett share of the capital for hospice building improvement works announced by the UK Government? Will she commit to continuing engagement to ensure that the vision set out by the independent palliative care commission is realised not just in one part of the United Kingdom, but across all of it?

4.17 pm

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for this important debate. I pay tribute to her political expertise in this area and for everything she has done.

Dame Cicely Saunders—much quoted in this debate—was the founder of the hospice movement in this country. She understood that medicine is not only about curing illnesses; it is about dignity and ensuring that people are supported compassionately at the most vulnerable moment of their lives. It was her work that transformed how we

think about care at the end of life, and today hospices all over the country continue that legacy. In my own work as an ear, nose and throat surgeon dealing with patients with advanced cancers in the head and neck, I am well aware of the importance of hospices.

I also pay tribute to Dr Eric Wilkes, who was a brilliant general practitioner and founder of the hospice movement in Sheffield. He was one of my teachers and one of the first people to understand the importance of integrating end-of-life care into community and hospital settings at St Luke's hospice. The term "palliative care" was invented only in 1990—some 20 years or so after I first met Dr Wilkes—and the Sheffield model has been completely crucial to this development.

I would like to talk about palliative care in my constituency of Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket, and in particular the remarkable work of St Nicholas hospice, its wonderful chief executive Linda McEnhill and all her staff. The hospice provides essential support for those approaching end of life and for their families and loved ones. What makes that hospice a little unusual is that it sits right on the campus of West Suffolk hospital, an arrangement that facilitates help for the patients in the hospice from all the services within the hospital. If, for example, a patient falls and fractures a leg, or needs an ear surgeon, support is available rapidly and nearby. Most hospices simply do not have access to that level of clinical support, and that is a real advantage for the Bury St Edmunds hospice.

St Nicholas hospice also illustrates a wider challenge facing palliative care across the country. As we know, demand for hospice services is increasing. St Nicholas lately increased its capacity by about 33% to meet the needs of patients and families in the local community. To expand, more staff need to be recruited, so we must do something to increase training capacity across the hospice service, particularly because we must ensure that we have a seven-day service. If we need to increase the service from a five-day service to a seven-day service, we need two sevenths more people.

Palliative care is a crucial part of a healthcare system. The problem, as we have heard on many occasions, is that hospices rely on charity and legacies. That is obviously admirable, but it raises an important question—one that I think was first asked by Baroness Finlay in the other place. We do not expect a maternity service to require charitable funding. If we needed a new maternity service, we would expect the NHS to put it up. Yet for some reason, if we need a hospice, we expect a charity to raise the funds for it and to run it. Being born and coming to the end of life are just inevitable parts of life, so I think we need a paradigm shift—a philosophical change—in the way we think about palliative care, which must be regarded as a core part of our national health service. If we genuinely believe that dignity at the end of life matters, let us make palliative care core.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): That brings us to the Front-Bench contributions. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

4.22 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): I thank all hon. Members for their thoughtful and moving contributions this afternoon. The hon. Members for Worcester (Tom

[Alison Bennett]

Collins) and for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) spoke so movingly about their own very personal loss. Of course, we would not be holding the debate were it not for the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who set out the frame of this debate so brilliantly and has done so much outside the Chamber to strive for better palliative care.

The hon. Member for York Central concluded her remarks by talking about bereavement support, and that is where I will begin mine. Last week, I was out in Burgess Hill. I saw an elderly gentleman who was standing by the edge of the pavement holding on to a walking frame. I got talking to him, and it turned out that he was waiting for a lift to St Peter and St James hospice, where he was going to a bereavement café. He told me that he had lost his wife two and a half years ago, but he had no recollection of the first two years following her loss—I think it had been a blur for him. For the past six months, he has been going back to St Peter and St James for the bereavement café, and he is beginning to feel a little better with that support each week. My thanks go to St Peter and St James, and to all the hospices that support our constituents, for what they do.

Our palliative care system is at tipping point, with a funding cliff edge approaching. Some 75% of hospices are running a deficit, two in five are planning reductions in clinical services in the year ahead, and 380 hospice beds across England lie empty, not because there is no need for them, but because there is no funding to staff hospices, as many hon. Members have said. Around 300,000 people are cared for by hospices every year, yet around 100,000 more need it. One in three of those who need hospice care miss out, and demand is rising sharply.

Over the next decade in England, just over 5.75 million people will die. Around 90% of them—an estimated 5.18 million people—will have palliative care needs. New research commissioned by Marie Curie and published earlier this month showed that nearly one in three dying people have both unaddressed symptoms and concerns and insufficient access to GP services at the end of life. That equates to nearly one person dying with unmet needs every three minutes. Without intervention, around 44,400 more people are projected to have unmet palliative care needs in 2050 compared with 2025. That is the scale of the challenge before us.

Hospices are essential pillars of our health and care system, especially at a time when the NHS is under such immense strain. The economic case for funding them properly is overwhelming. Approximately 15% of all emergency hospital admissions in England involve people in their last year of life—nearly 1 million admissions in 2023 alone. Those patients account for around 30% of all emergency hospital bed days. In the last six months of life, around 360,000 people spent a total of 8.4 million days in hospital. With the average acute bed day costing around £500, and with roughly 40% to 50% of the NHS budget concentrated in acute settings, the potential for a more appropriate allocation of resources is obvious.

Around 69% of people are admitted as in-patients in the final six months, with a median stay of 13 days, and 80% of those who die in hospital had an emergency admission in their final month of life. These are real people—people who, with better planning and properly

resourced hospice, community nursing, GP, pharmacy and paramedic services, might have experienced a calmer, more dignified end of life and spared the NHS considerable cost. But the very sector that relieves this pressure is itself under extraordinary strain. Between 2022 and 2024, there was a £47 million real-terms cut in hospice funding. As the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) noted, the disastrous rise in employer national insurance contributions alone is costing hospices in England an estimated £34 million a year.

Hospices collectively raise about £1.4 billion themselves. Government funding amounts to just over £500 million—barely a quarter of the income—and in some areas, hospices receive as little as 8% of their funding from NHS grants. There is no robust national methodology underpinning these variations. It is a postcode lottery and, as the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) noted, the variation in funding for children's hospices is even more acute than that in the adult hospice sector. Access to compassionate end-of-life care should not depend on geography, the strength of an area's ability to raise funds or whether someone is an adult or a child.

Hospices, of course, welcome the capital funding from the Government, but it quite simply does not pay nurses' salaries. Staff account for around 70% of hospice costs. Without revenue funding for core services, capital investment does not keep beds open or prevent service reductions. This is a national, structural problem, but it is also a very real one for all our areas across the country, particularly for my area in Sussex, where the Southern Hospice Group is consulting on how to cut its costs.

Marie Curie and others have warmly welcomed the Government's commitment to developing a palliative care and end-of-life care modern service framework, with an interim report expected in the spring and a final report in the autumn. It will be the first national plan for palliative and end-of-life care since 2008. That is, of course, good news. The Government have rightly identified five core challenges: delays in early identification, inconsistent commissioning, workforce shortages, gaps in 24/7 provision, and limited uptake of personalised and advance care planning. But those are not new problems that need solving—we have known about them for some time—and if this framework is to succeed, it must go further.

My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I are campaigning to double the funding for bereavement support payments, reversing the last Conservative Government's cuts since 2017. We would also reduce isolation following a bereavement, by improving access to social prescribing and through the work of a dedicated Minister for tackling loneliness. We would improve support for children who have lost a parent by appointing a Cabinet member for children and young children, and extend pupil premium plus funding to children in kinship care. The Government must provide stronger national leadership and oversight, and they must place palliative and end-of-life care at the heart of plans for a neighbourhood health service, looking beyond hospices. They must deliver a new funding and commissioning model that ends the postcode lottery. They must invest properly in the workforce, and scale up proven models of care that shift support from hospital to community, improving patient experience and delivering better value for taxpayers.

The Government seem happy to talk about moving care from hospitals to the community, but we need a material change. The Liberal Democrats believe that the Government have a choice: they can allow hospices to drift from crisis to crisis, with beds closed, staff lost, and unmet need rising year after year, all while still struggling to plug gaps left by the struggling NHS; or, they can seize the moment, through the modern service framework, to build a sustainable system that matches funding to need and delivers dignity for all. No one should face death in avoidable pain, no family should be left unsupported, and no responsible Government should ignore the evidence that properly funded palliative care is both the compassionate and the economically responsible choice.

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

4.31 pm

Stuart Andrew (Daventry) (Con): May I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) on securing this important debate, and the independent commission on palliative and end-of-life care on the amazing work that it has undertaken? Its report certainly provides an important contribution to the discussion about how we ensure that people receive compassionate and high-quality care at the end of life.

This debate is important. There is a saying that nothing is certain in life other than death and taxes, but it seems that we spend an awful lot of time in this place talking about taxes, and until recently we have not really talked about death. I agree with the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glindon), who said that we have gone into assisted dying but rather missed or leapfrogged the important debate around palliative care. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) for his tribute to Dougie Mac, and to all colleagues who have made representations and congratulated hospices on the amazing work that they do around the country. We also heard moving contributions from the hon. Members for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer), and for Worcester (Tom Collins). These debates are even more powerful when we talk about personal experiences that we have been through, and I thank them for sharing those.

For me, palliative care is about dignity, compassion and choice at the most difficult moments in people's lives. When it works well, it relieves suffering, supports families, and allows people to spend their final days in the place and manner that they choose. Before coming to the House I had the privilege of working for 16 years in the hospice movement in both children and adult hospices, and with organisations supporting families whose loved ones were edging towards the end of their life. Many of those were supporting the families of children who had life-limiting conditions. That experience has stayed with me and informed how seriously I take this debate, because I saw first-hand the extraordinary compassion and professionalism of the people who provide such care, and the profound difference that it makes to families facing unimaginable circumstances.

When it comes to children, no parent expects to outlive their child. Often those parents would say to me that when they realised that their child was living with a

life-limiting condition, it meant that their dreams and aspirations changed. Suddenly they were not thinking about their child's first day at school or university, or their wedding day; they were changing their whole aspect and plan for that child's life. That is why hospices and palliative care services are so important, and they support more than 300,000 people every year.

Much has been said about the wonderful Dame Cicely Saunders, but we should also pay tribute to Sister Frances Dominica, who set up the first children's hospice in the UK. There was a wonderful saying in children's hospices that I always used to relay: they cannot add days to their lives, but they can add life to their days. That shows how important hospices are to so many families.

Hospices are a vital part of our health system because they are relieving pressure on hospitals and providing specialist care in communities across the country. Hospices are not an optional extra in our health system—they are a core part of how our compassionate healthcare should work. Seeing adults and children get the care that they needed at the end of their lives, as I did at Hope House children's hospice, East Lancashire adult hospice and Martin House children's hospice, was phenomenal. It is no wonder that our hospice movement has been world-leading.

However, the sector is under increasing strain. Hospice leaders report rising costs, workforce shortages and growing demand for services at the very moment that they are struggling. Across the country, we are seeing reductions in services, bed closures and significant financial pressures. As many hon. Members have said, Hospice UK has warned that two in five hospices are now cutting or reducing services. I know that concerns every Member of the House.

The Government will point to recent announcements about capital funding for hospices and the continuation of the children's hospice grant, and those investments are welcome. But capital investment and capital funding cannot pay for nurses, doctors or the day-to-day delivery of care. What the sector needs is sustainable revenue funding. As a former head of fundraising, I know that capital fundraising is often the easiest, because people want to buy a new building or a piece of equipment, and paying the wages is never as, dare I say, sexy.

As many hon. Members have said, children's palliative care also faces challenges. Children with life-limiting conditions and their families require specialist care that supports them from diagnosis through to the end of life and beyond. I remember one parent saying to me that if he got up eight times in the night to his daughter, he would consider that he had had a good night's sleep—I cannot imagine what that must be like. I also saw siblings having a different life from those of their school friends because their brother or sister needed extra, additional care. Children's hospices offer wonderful bereavement support to families, which is another issue that many hon. Members have mentioned.

Access to that care remains inconsistent across the country. As my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) said, evidence suggests that fewer than one in five integrated care boards formally commission specialist children's palliative care services that meet national standards. There are also serious workforce shortages. England has just over 1,000 community children's nurses, when safe staffing estimates suggest that nearly 5,000 are required. Across the UK, there are

[Stuart Andrew]

only around 24 specialist paediatric palliative care consultants, when experts estimate between 40 and 60 are needed. For many families that means they cannot access the support they need at home, even when that is their preference.

The Government have indicated that they will publish a modern service framework for palliative and end-of-life care later this year, which I absolutely welcome and I commend the Government for that. That framework presents a really important opportunity to address the challenges facing the sector.

I would like to ask the Minister a couple of questions. I will not repeat the ones that my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East mentioned because we all had that briefing. What steps will be taken to address the workforce shortages facing palliative services, particularly community children's nurses and specialist consultants? What plans do the Department have to ensure that hospices have the sustainable funding required to continue delivering these vital services and protect their independence? I get the call for us not to have so much reliance on fundraising, but there is a real danger that hospices lose that independence if they take that statutory funding. The thing I always noticed was how they were more able to respond very quickly to the needs of individual families than the NHS. It is really important that we safeguard that independence.

How will the Government ensure that this opportunity with the new plan seizes the chance to stop that postcode lottery? Will it see where we should firm up some of the guidance to ICBs around the country? Will Ministers look at the innovation that charities are doing in this work around palliative care? I think particularly of Sue Ryder, which is investing in add-on wards at the Airedale general hospital in Yorkshire. It is also focusing more on home services, rather than services in the building, and on getting to more and more patients. It is important that we engage with and learn from it so that we can see it evolving into best practice.

There is also a really important issue around transition, which is important for young adults. When I worked at Martin House, we had just opened the teenage unit, which enabled us to have a setting that was a bit more grown up but not old ladyish or old mannish, if I can put it that way; it was an environment suited to the needs of those young people. Thankfully, we now see that these young people are living longer. When I was working at Martin House, young boys with Duchenne muscular dystrophy would probably come to the end of their life at the age of 18. They are now living into their late 20s, 30s and sometimes even 40s.

There needs to be an appropriate environment for those people to have support, because palliative care is one of the most compassionate parts of our health system. The professionals, volunteers and charities that deliver that care do extraordinary work every day, and they deserve a system that supports them and ensures that every patient and family can access the care that they need at the end of life. I hope the Minister can tell us how the Government intend to achieve that.

4.42 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for securing this important debate. We entered

Parliament at the same time; we were immediately on opposite sides of the assisted dying debate, and we remain so. Although the Government are neutral, we have always articulated our concern around palliative and end-of-life care in many debates in this House. My hon. Friend has done a marvellous job of that today by bringing forward this debate.

I also thank all my hon. Friend's colleagues on the commission on palliative and end-of-life care for the vital work they do as they continue to develop their third report. We are really grateful to all those who work or volunteer in the palliative care and end-of-life sector for the care and support that they provide to patients, families and loved ones at a time when they need it the most. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) said, everyone deserves a good death.

I commend the shadow Secretary of State for his contribution regarding his excellent experience in the sector; he made some really valuable comments. I have talked about this before, but I too come to this debate with experience. In 2008, I worked with clinicians around end of life and how to live and die with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease—a really unpleasant disease, if there is such a thing as a pleasant disease. I was made aware that people were talking about how to live with it, but no one was really responsible for working with patients and families on how to die with COPD.

I learned a lot about how we talk about death and dying in the health service and the care service, as well as the great work that our trainers and people do to support our clinicians about how best to die. That was really valuable for me when my own father died at home in 2010, supported by Macmillan and a fantastic community care team, which happened partly due to the training that I had and how I was able to articulate on behalf of my family. Things should not have to be like they are. That was 16 years ago, and it is really concerning that across the country people are still experiencing such poor care.

I see lots of that good care in my own local hospital, St Peter's, which is doing some of the innovation that the shadow Secretary of State mentioned.

I want to reassure colleagues that the Government and my hon. Friend the Minister for Care, who leads on this work, are absolutely committed to creating a society in which everyone receives high-quality, compassionate care from diagnosis through to the end of life.

We have heard a lot about the role of hospices today, from my hon. Friends the Members for York Central, for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer), for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton), for Beckenham and Penge (Liam Conlon), for Cannock Chase, for West Dunbartonshire (Douglas McAllister) and for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley), and from shadow Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew). Although we recognise that the majority of palliative and end-of-life care is provided by NHS staff and services, we absolutely recognise that many hospitals do fantastic work in this area, and they face a challenging financial situation due to a range of pressures.

That is why last year we announced that we would support the sector with a record £125 million capital funding boost for those hospitals in England, to help them to provide the best physical environment for the

people they care for. That money can be spent on fixing a roof, paying for double glazing or buying a new boiler. Although I take the shadow Secretary of State's point that sometimes people are more willing to contribute to those sorts of things, I know too that finding the money to fund such repairs is what keeps those running the system awake at night, and this work also saves money in the long run, particularly on energy bills. The full £125 million has now been allocated to 158 eligible hospices by Hospice UK. My hon. Friend the Minister for Care has been touring the country to visit many of those hospices to see at first hand some of the good that the money is doing.

On top of that, we are providing around £80 million in revenue funding for children and young people's hospitals over the next three years, as been said, giving them the stability they need to plan ahead—that was welcomed by the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis). To reassure him, we absolutely recognise the different needs of children and their families in this work. A long-term commitment was a key demand from the sector, which faces a cliff edge in funding cycles every year. Children and young people's hospices and integrated care boards have been informed of their allocations for the next financial year, and we intend to let hospices know about funding for future years once the process is complete.

We absolutely recognise that this money will not be a silver bullet, and many hospices still face pressing challenges. The need for palliative care and end-of-life care is also projected to rise in coming years with our ageing population, as we have heard. However, although around 75% to 90% of those at end of life would benefit from palliative care and end-of-life care support, only about 55% are identified as such in primary care. That is why NHS England recently wrote to all ICBs requesting an immediate update on the financial stability of hospices in their footprint and the steps needed to mitigate those risks. That will give us a clear national picture of any hospitals at risk of closure or significant service reductions and the potential impact on patients' families and the wider urgent care system.

With regard to the wider system, neighbourhood health services and their development sit at the heart of our 10-year plan. We are building a service that will deliver more personalised care closer to where people live, empower people to lead healthier, independent lives where they can, and give them a genuine choice about how to access support. I want to reassure hon. Members that the NHS medium-term planning guidance identifies those at the end of life as a high-priority cohort in the implementation of neighbourhood health. I also say to my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glendon) that the workforce plan, when it comes forward, will reflect the move into neighbourhood services.

We have to move away from disjointed pathways, as my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Tom Collins) articulated so well in speaking about his terrible experience with his mother, and ensure a paradigm shift that looks at people holistically throughout the pathway, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket said.

I am the Minister responsible for reforms to the system architecture, and we are asking ICBs to do more. NHS England's strategic commissioning framework makes

it clear that we expect them to commission services in line with the current and future needs of the people they serve. We are moving away from ringfenced incentive budgets, and streamlining the incentives to focus more on the outcomes that we should all expect from our systems. Via the model ICB blueprint, we have made it clear that it is the mission of ICBs to reduce inequalities through a careful assessment of the quality, performance and productivity of existing provision. As we heard in today's debate, we have to ensure that there are high standards and focused objectives. Next month, ICBs and NHS providers will create a new plan to more effectively manage the needs of high-priority people. NHS England is supporting commissioners to understand those needs, with a dashboard that brings together all relevant local data in one place.

There is currently a contracting mix in the sector, as we have heard today. When we support ICBs to commission more strategically, we have to start moving away from the grant and block contract models. That is why the Government are developing a landmark palliative care and end-of-life modern service framework, or MSF, for England. Palliative and end-of-life care has been variable across the country for far too long, but the modern service framework will put a floor under the kind of care that patients can expect, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy). Although it would not be right to pre-empt exactly what will be in the final MSF at this time, we are working closely with all stakeholders to ensure that everyone has access to the care they need in the right place and at the right time. As part of the MSF, we have invited colleagues from a number of organisations to engage with us.

Ben Coleman: Can the Minister confirm that the MSF will include targeted support for children who require palliative care?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend pre-empts my next paragraph; I thank him for his contribution.

As part of the development of the MSF, we will be looking at some of the important aspects of care that my hon. Friend the Member for York Central mentioned, such as early identification of need, care delivered closer to home by integrated generalist and specialist teams, and strengthened out-of-hours community health support, including a dedicated phone line. I assure the right hon. Member for New Forest East that children, parents and carers will be included in that endeavour. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) said, the experiences of people like Amy inform such work. Let me say to my hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) that the experience of Calum and the Turner family must not be repeated.

Hospices do an amazing job for people at the end of life, those with life-limiting conditions, and the whole community of family and friends who support their loved ones on that journey, including through bereavement support, as we have talked about today. The quality of care, the compassion and the love that hospices provide are second to none. We absolutely recognise that the sector faces challenges, and we are determined to work with all our partners to understand those challenges. We are not talking about spending more; we are talking

[Karin Smyth]

about focusing on the money we have at the moment and spending it better. We are developing a values-based, outcome-focused financial model to reflect people's experience of care throughout their lifetime. While there are no easy answers, we are supporting them with record funding and reform.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful to the Minister for her speech, but we have heard throughout the debate that 100,000 people are not getting the care they need. One in three people needs additional support. By maintaining the financial cap, how are we going to build enough capacity to ensure that everybody has access to excellent care at the end of life?

Karin Smyth: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution. This issue warrants a longer debate, so that we can understand how to move the resources that exist. As we have heard this afternoon, when people are unnecessarily admitted to hospital, which is terribly distressing for them and their families, the resources follow them. It is about moving those resources towards neighbourhood health services, in which this cohort of people will be absolutely central, as I have said. That is what we need to be doing, and we will continue to discuss this with people as we move the service towards being community-based.

Colleagues are right to champion their cause in the House today, and we will continue to work on this issue to make sure that people have good-quality care across the country. Given the measures I have outlined this afternoon, I hope Members will agree that we are listening. We look forward to working with colleagues to make sure that we develop these services for the future.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister give way?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Minister has finished speaking, but the hon. Member does get to wind up the debate.

4.54 pm

Rachael Maskell: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. We have had 20 contributions to the debate, with 12 excellent speeches from Back Benchers; I have to say that it has been a debate of the highest calibre. I heard so clearly such praise for the staff working in palliative medicine right across the country—in Scotland and in England—and I thank them myself, too.

I particularly acknowledge the speeches made by my hon. Friends the Members for Worcester (Tom Collins) and for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer), who talked about the loss of their mothers, with very contrasting experiences. That demonstrates the inequity across palliative medicine, and it cannot be right that people are not getting the care that they absolutely must get.

I wanted to ask the Minister a follow-up question about how the transition takes place. If we do not frontload the funding, we will never see the development of community provision, because we will not be able to pull people out without the resourcing in the community. The challenge really arises from the whole model, which was the emphasis of my speech. I trust we will look very carefully at enabling the flow of patients into the community and getting care in the right place, but also at the sufficiency of funding, as so many hon. Members said, to ensure the excellence of the care itself.

We also heard about the challenges that all hon. Members have had, whether for child or adult services, and we need to ensure that we train the workforce and have a sufficient workforce in the future. We need to get the commissioning right, and address those very pertinent issues. Above all, we must invest in the time and the compassion that is needed to give families and patients excellence in palliative care. As a clinician, I have witnessed working with people at the end of life. In such special moments, the whole workforce crowds around the patients, and supports them and their families. It is so moving, and today I also heard my hon. Friends' moving reflections, which is what the debate is all about. It is about ensuring that we have those really special moments at the end of life, and we should really invest in that time so people can have those memories and cherish everything they possibly can.

We have debated assisted dying so much in this place over the last year or so. I have heard so many examples of poor care, where I know that specialist palliative medicine could have made such a difference to the individuals. That is why today's debate is not only timely, but necessary. We must really invest so that everyone has the opportunity to receive that amazing care, love and support at the end of life, and so they do not have to even contemplate assisted dying. I think we have a responsibility to put this front and centre. Let us move on from the debate on assisted dying to make sure we get care right for everyone.

I want to close by saying a huge thank you to everyone here; I really do appreciate it. I should put on record that I am the co-chair, with Baroness Finlay, of the all-party parliamentary group on dying well. I invite all hon. Members to join us as we really try to advance this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the findings of the Independent Palliative Care Commission; calls on the Government to implement its recommendations in full, including to establish a comprehensive and specialist palliative care service that is equally accessible to everyone and properly funded, as well as a new commissioning framework that secures a service across all settings and is available from the point of a terminal diagnosis, the advancement of a life-limiting illness or latter stages of a chronic condition; and further calls on the Government to have a focus on workforce planning and training, to provide a comprehensive palliative care service, and to ensure that patients are empowered through future care plans to articulate what they want to happen towards the end of their life, while also establishing bereavement services for all.

Women's Health Strategy: Endometriosis and Fibroids

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

5 pm

Ms Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): Endometriosis, fibroids and related gynaecological conditions ruin the lives of millions of women, yet these conditions remain undiagnosed, misdiagnosed, dismissed or mistreated within the health system. Women are told to shut up and stop complaining. We are fobbed off. We experience shameful delays. We are left in pain. My argument today is simple. We need the forthcoming women's health strategy to address these conditions head-on, listen to women, tackle the taboos, and create timely and effective treatment.

One in 10 women suffer from endometriosis. It is a painful, debilitating condition, found in every community, workplace and family. That statistic means that at least 20 women Members in this current Parliament could be suffering from endometriosis. Despite being widespread, it remains misunderstood and dismissed, yet it ruins women's ability to learn, earn, have sex, have children and live a normal, healthy life. It destroys mental health. In recent years, there has been greater awareness and a wider discussion of the impact of the condition, led by public figures such as the BBC's Emma Barnett, and sparked by this year's BAFTA-winning short film, "This Is Endometriosis", which I hope to host a screening of in Parliament soon. In this House, I commend the great work of the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on endometriosis, my hon. Friend the Member for Bathgate and Linlithgow (Kirsteen Sullivan), and the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen).

Millions of women, however, are still being failed by the NHS and wider society. There is still a lack of appreciation of the true nature of the disease, a lack of suitable support throughout the worlds of education and work, and stigma associated with the symptoms, which include heavy bleeding and intense, blinding pain. The average wait for diagnosis is nine years and four months, according to the latest report, launched this week, by the charity Endometriosis UK. The report highlights that diagnosis times are getting worse, not better. March is Endometriosis Action Month. It is vital that we use this opportunity to act now for the benefit of those suffering today, and those who will suffer long into the future. Sadly, even with a diagnosis, there is no cure—just pain management.

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for taking time for this intervention on her passionate speech about the huge number of women who suffer from endometriosis. Given the challenges with diagnosis, and the enormous pain and suffering that she has outlined, does she agree that far more money and Government support need to go into research, so that we can better understand this condition and how to diagnose and treat it?

Ms Oppong-Asare: It is nice to have a male ally in the Chamber—in fact, a few male allies. I think the issue is even wider than that. The Government are looking to

publish the women's health strategy quite soon. I will talk about this in more detail, but the data on the delays is already out there. We need to recognise the signs and make sure that people get the help they need. I will talk in detail about some of the work I have done, particularly in my constituency, to highlight the issue.

It has been often said, though it is worth repeating, that if these conditions were suffered by one in 10 men, there would be research into a cure, fast diagnosis, effective treatment, time off work, and a sympathetic, understanding reaction from all other men. If only women got the same reaction at work, or in the health system. Endometriosis UK found that 39% of its respondents had to visit the GP 10 or more times before endometriosis was suspected, and 46% were sent home from hospital without treatment. That is simply outrageous. To respond to what the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) said, people are visiting GPs repeatedly before the condition is recognised.

When I surveyed my constituents, one told me:

"I had to go to my GP three times and leave an utterly desperate comment begging for help until they took me seriously."

Another said:

"It was a condition I had never even heard of until it started to affect me."

And another said the

"pain was so excruciating that it felt worse than birth pain".

That is just so common. That is the experience of millions of women down the decades. Women of colour suffer the double whammy of facing misogyny in the NHS, as well as the racism that tells us that we have a higher pain threshold, or that "black women can handle it." The recent interim report on maternity services by Baroness Amos last week highlighted the structural racism in the NHS, which leads to worse health outcomes for women of colour. The Endometriosis UK report says that for women of colour, the average wait for diagnosis is now 11 years. That is a grave injustice. This is not just a question of equitable health provision, but a question of social justice for women.

It of course makes no sense for the NHS, with stretched resources and overworked staff, to have millions of women who repeatedly present with their symptoms being sent away, returning in pain, and making complaints for years on end. Getting it right first time matters. I welcome the new NHS Online, a virtual hospital in England due to launch in 2027. Menstrual health conditions, including endometriosis, will be one of the priority areas. The NHS Online hospital will use the NHS app to triage patients and provide fast access to specialist clinicians online. Where needed, specialists will be able to arrange local testing for women. I invite the Minister to comment further on how NHS Online will help women with these conditions.

The forthcoming women's health strategy affords us a huge opportunity to move forward. I know the Minister will not be divulging its contents to the House today, and that we have to wait to read the strategy in full, but both the Minister and her ministerial colleague in the other place, who is responsible for women's health, get it. She knows that a range of conditions affecting so many millions must be front and centre in the strategy. The strategy must address early diagnosis and faster, effective treatment. It must tackle the stigma and taboos. Most of all, it must address the way that doctors are

[Ms Oppong-Asare]

trained, so that endometriosis, fibroids and similar conditions are identified fast. We have made great progress in the early identification of sepsis, for example. We must do the same for endometriosis and fibroids.

Will the Minister give us an assurance that training for doctors will form a key part of the strategy? Will she work with the Royal College of GPs and NHS training providers to ensure that these conditions are central to the syllabus, and that every newly qualified doctor has the knowledge to identify endometriosis when a woman presents with the symptoms? Early diagnosis means early treatment, and that saves a huge amount of pain, dismay and taxpayers' cash down the line. It really is a common-sense approach, given the huge number of women involved.

I long for the day when we have a cure. With proper medical research, which the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage alluded to, I am sure that day will come. In the meantime, does the Minister agree that women should not be waiting for years in unnecessary pain, and that the women's health strategy can and must offer women in pain a real sense of hope?

5.9 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Ms Oppong-Asare) on securing this important debate. Baroness Merron, who leads on this work for the Department, and I are grateful to my hon. Friend for the conversations that she has been leading; for putting the spotlight on endometriosis, as well as on the renewed women's health strategy; and for giving me the opportunity to set out what the Government are doing this Endometriosis Action Month.

As my hon. Friend has said, for far too long, women with gynaecological conditions including endometriosis and fibroids have been failed. We acknowledge the impact that that has on all aspects of their lives. This Government's message to women is clear: you do not have to put up with that any more.

I am pleased to hear that my hon. Friend will be hosting a screening of the short film "This Is Endometriosis", which is about the harrowing experience of a woman seeking care for her endometriosis symptoms. I hope to be able to get along to that screening when it happens, and I encourage others to do so, too.

This Government inherited a broken NHS system that still does not understand the needs of many women and was not designed with women in mind. We are committed to changing that, and to ensuring that women are listened to and get the healthcare that they need, when they need it. Improving awareness of endometriosis, fibroids and other women's health conditions is a vital first step in meeting our commitment to end this neglect of women's health and reduce the stigma attached to it. My hon. Friend is doing her part through this debate.

The General Medical Council has begun work to improve women's health representation in the curricula used to train healthcare professionals. Since last year, students graduating from UK medical schools have been required to pass the medical licensing assessment, which encourages a better understanding of common women's health problems among all doctors as they start their career in the UK. This assessment includes

topics to do with women's health, including endometriosis and fibroids. Women's health is included in the Royal College of General Practitioners' curriculum for trainee GPs and its women's health library, which brings together educational resources and guidelines on women's health. In November 2024, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence updated its guidelines on endometriosis to make recommendations for healthcare professionals on referral and investigations for women for whom that is suspected to be the diagnosis.

Taken together, these actions will improve the standard of care that women receive. It is encouraging to see not just the NHS but all our partners and arm's length bodies taking action to raise awareness and improve training. This work has to be ongoing across Government. It is shocking, perhaps, that this started only fairly recently, but like my hon. Friend, I pay tribute to many hon. Members across the House who have led an awful lot of work to raise awareness of this issue in the last few Parliaments, and I think that work is starting to bear fruit. Last July, the Department for Education published revised statutory guidance that sets out in black and white that secondary schools should cover menstrual and gynaecological health, covering things like heavy bleeding and when to seek help from professionals.

Women often spend years being dismissed, misdiagnosed or simply not listened to. This was reflected in Endometriosis UK's recent report, which my hon. Friend has made reference to. We are clear that this is unacceptable, and that women should not have to put up with it any more. We have introduced Jess's rule, which requires GPs to rethink diagnoses for their patients. We are also rolling out Martha's rule, which will give in-patients in acute hospitals in England the ability to initiate a rapid review of their case by someone outside their immediate care team. These rules will help to ensure that women are listened to by their doctors, and that their concerns are not dismissed.

Early diagnosis is key, and that is why we continue to roll out community diagnostic centres across the country for women on gynaecological pathways. As of last month, 106 community diagnostic centres across the country offer an out-of-hours service 12 hours a day, seven days a week, meaning that patients can access vital diagnostic tests around busy working lives.

In September, we announced NHS Online, a new online hospital, to give women on certain pathways the choice of getting the specialist care that they need from their home. This will mean that wherever women live in this country, they can access the very best gynaecological care. Earlier this year, we announced that menstrual problems, which may be a sign of endometriosis and fibroids, will be among the first nine conditions available for referral from 2027. The detail is being worked through ahead of the launch next year.

Our revolutionary online hospital will help reduce patient waiting times, and deliver the equivalent of up to 8.5 million appointments and assessments in its first three years. That is four times more than an average trust, and it will give women choice and control over their care. Finally, this Government are committed to encouraging integrated care boards to further expand women's healthcare at neighbourhood level, and to support ICBs in learning from women's health hub pilots, so that they can improve services for women, as well as for the rest of the population.

Women can be impacted by a range of health conditions at the same time, including those that only affect women; those that affect women differently from, or more severely than, men; and those that affect different groups differently, such as fibroids. As my hon. Friend said, black women are disproportionately affected, and often face barriers to timely and compassionate care. This is also the case for ethnically diverse women with endometriosis, as highlighted in the Endometriosis UK report.

We are not complacent about these inequalities. We are committed to building a fairer Britain to ensure that people can live well for longer and spend less time in ill health. Our 10-year health plan will focus on shifting care from hospital to communities, and on how neighbourhood delivery will help address gaps in provision and long waiting times, specifically for those from deprived areas in constituencies like mine, and women from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Let me turn to the point about research made by the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover). The Department, through the National Institute for

Health and Care Research, has commissioned several studies focused on endometriosis diagnosis, treatment and patient experience. The NIHR is funding seven active research awards, with investment totalling £7.8 million. That includes a new £2.3 million award for research starting in March 2026 on the effectiveness of pain management for endometriosis.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead has said, we know that services are not serving women as they need to right now, but there are some helpful signs that that is starting to change. Training and awareness are a key part of that. We need to keep highlighting the differences as women present for care. We will listen to women, and I look forward to working with my hon. Friend and others on developing and implementing a renewed women's health strategy over the coming months.

Question put and agreed to.

5.16 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 5 March 2026

[EMMA LEWELL *in the Chair*]

Local Museums

1.30 pm

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the contribution of local museums.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell.

Colleagues will know that I am incredibly proud to call Thurrock home. I am the first local MP to be was born and raised in the constituency, and it is an honour to represent the people I grew up alongside. Thurrock has a fighting spirit. Our small part of the world punches well above its weight, with thriving ports, historic forts and the river on our doorstep. Geographically, we sit right where the Thames starts to narrow on its way into London, and because of our strategic location, we have always served as a gateway to the city. It was Thurrock where Queen Elizabeth rallied her troops to fight off the Spanish armada, where brave, ordinary people gathered and prepared for the D-day operations and where the Empire Windrush disembarked, bringing all those who answered the call to help restore and rebuild after the war.

Our history has shaped this country, and it is only right that it is recorded, remembered and celebrated. That is where our local museums play a critical role. They keep our local histories alive and engender a sense of pride in where we are from. They show young people, like my daughters, who are growing up in Thurrock—which, to be honest, does not always get the attention it deserves—that they are right to be proud of the place where they live. That is why I am so grateful to have such fantastic local museums on our doorstep.

The Thurrock museum is a prime example. More than 250,000 years of our history can be found in the display cases, and more than 1,500 objects are on show. I would really recommend a trip to take the kids to learn about the mammoths that once lived in Aveley or to look at the medieval relics from Grays. I am very grateful to the current Labour council for keeping the place up and running. Despite being under an immense amount of financial pressure, it recognises how much the whole Thameside complex, where the museum is housed, means to families in our area.

Just outside my constituency but still within the boundary of Thurrock, we have Coalhouse fort, which has just received heritage lottery funding to secure its long-term future, and the small but powerful Bata Museum, which tells the fascinating story of how an eastern European shoe manufacturer changed the face of this small village in Essex.

I primarily want to focus on the Purfleet Heritage and Military Centre. On Sunday, the centre reopened after a three-month renovation period. Volunteers have put in an immense effort to pull together a series of new exhibitions and revamp old ones. If someone wants to know something about our little corner of the world,

I can guarantee that it can be found there. It tracks the Royal Navy from Nelson's era to world war two, the RAF from its very beginnings all the way through to the battle of Britain, and the Army from the battle of Waterloo right up until the Falklands. On top of that, there is information on the local home front, the Royal Flying Corps and the Purfleet gunners.

In fact, even the building itself is a piece of history: it is a former gunpowder magazine built in the mid-18th century, and for more than 200 years it formed an integral part of the UK's military infrastructure, stashing the gunpowder that supplied our Army and Navy during countless wars, as well as both sides in the American civil war. One of my favourite exhibits in the museum is a model of an L-15 zeppelin, which is strung up on the ceiling above the shelves. It was the first zeppelin to be shot down in world war one; that achievement earned each of the gunners at the Purfleet garrison a gold medallion from the Mayor of London.

The museum also houses an exhibition celebrating and commemorating the achievements and history of the Gurkha regiments, and a significant portion of veterans from those regiments now call Thurrock home. I am extremely proud that the museum also plays host to the only Gurkha memorial in Essex, which was unveiled in 2024 thanks to the tireless efforts of the Thurrock Nepalese Gurkha community and its work with the museum volunteers. It sits alongside the museum's proud tradition of remembering those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice for our country and way of life.

I want to be clear that Thurrock's place in the history books extends well beyond our military contribution. New displays at the Purfleet Heritage and Military Centre also show off the borough's sporting success, our railways and industry, our geology, and perhaps most fascinatingly, our Dracula connection. Most people do not know that the infamous Carfax residence is based on Purfleet House, so for anyone who might be a goth, or of a gothic persuasion, do not go to Whitby—get the train to Purfleet, as we have a much bigger connection to Dracula than Whitby. For anyone who is interested, I am told that there is still space on the Halloween Dracula tour, which is a lot of fun.

Such tours are part of a whole range of visits and walks put on by the centre. Like everything else at the site, these are run by a group of volunteers, who work tirelessly year round. We are very lucky to have some of them in the Gallery today, including Trevor, Polly, Ollie, Paul, Sylak, Jeff, Phillip, Claire and Yvette. They follow in the footsteps of Alan and Sue Gosling, the husband and wife duo who saved the building, set up the museum and dedicated years of their life to researching local history. Sadly, Alan passed away last year, but his legacy lives on in the volunteers who have come after him. The 20-strong team have spent months renovating, organising donations and putting together collections. They do it because they love it, and are passionate about the story of our area.

It certainly is not easy. When I asked Trevor how the team created the new exhibitions, he told me, perhaps too candidly, that they “begged, borrowed and stole.” They have medal cases from London-based museums, old photos from Thurrock residents, original weaponry and even a 5-foot model shark up on the roof. Trevor says the museum receives very limited funding. It makes most of its money from small donations, the £5 entrance fee or yearly subscriptions from supporters. As a result,

[Jen Craft]

the team struggle with the cost of maintaining such an old building, and have to pull together to make basic upgrades, such as putting hot water in the toilets—I am pleased to announce that they now do have hot water in the toilets, following the renovations.

Many museums in other hon. Members' constituencies will face similar challenges. That is why I am so glad that this Government are committed to offering more support. Ministers have earmarked more than £100 million to cover the costs of maintenance, backlogs and bills, and have put £20 million towards the new museum renewal fund, which is reserved entirely for local civic organisations. This is positive progress, and I am so pleased that the Government recognise the value of local museums up and down the country.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for making an amazing speech and celebrating local history. In my constituency we have the Brunel Museum, which is a fantastic local resource covering engineering history, the Thames and the Brunel family. It makes an estimated £150,000 social value contribution, but it struggles to compete for resources. Does she agree that councils, Ministers and the Department should ensure that resources made available by this Government and at a local level can be received by smaller community museums, and not just the main national museums, which tend to take the lion's share?

Jen Craft: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution; I think he may have had a sneak peek at my speech, as that is just what I am coming to. Let me give a huge shout-out to the Brunel Museum—I am a big fan. It includes a replica of the first ever boring machine—I am sorry to be boring, but it is a boring machine—the technology of which is still used today. On Thursday next week, I believe, I am going to open a new one in my constituency, which will still be using exactly the same technology that Brunel pioneered at the Rotherhithe tunnel. It is really interesting; I love it.

It is important to ensure—this is the point I was coming to—that smaller, volunteer-run sites can access the help that is available. Such museums do not always have the capacity to work through complex application processes, and they are up against bigger organisations that have the time and expertise to put together more competitive bids. To give a bit of context, the Arts Council's application guidance for the museum estate and development fund is just over 50 pages long, and it asks candidates to have detailed plans and proposals, as well as a recent costed condition survey. For places such as Purfleet Military and Heritage Centre, that is a big ask.

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): The hon. Member is making an important speech, and is particularly talking about small independently run museums. Does she agree that, since many local museums are owned and run by local authorities and face the risk of closure because of severe underfunding, the Government must ensure that local authorities have sufficient funding to keep those local museums open, especially given that all the research shows that they have a huge benefit in our local economies? In Bristol, for example, our arts and culture sector created nearly £900 million of economic and social value this year.

Jen Craft: I agree; it is really important to make sure that those museums are properly funded. As the hon. Member will be aware, they run by and large on voluntary efforts and voluntary contributions. Sometimes, although the local council owns the space, it does not necessarily pay for the upkeep, running and staffing. Looking at how best to fund those museums going forward, while recognising the contributions made by volunteers, is perhaps key.

There is no question that criteria need to be in place when looking at funding bids to make sure that money is well spent, but the process needs to be accessible. If we could provide smaller pots of money aimed at hyper-local, volunteer-run sites, perhaps the application could be simplified. At the moment, most grants start at around £50,000. In the east of England, recipients of the museum renewal fund were typically larger local organisations that were awarded upwards of £60,000. I have two questions for the Minister. First, how will he make sure that small museums can access Government support? Secondly, would he consider offering more small grants with a simpler application process?

It is right that we recognise the value of small museums. Although they do not attract massive numbers of visitors or bring in loads of tourist revenue—I am hoping to change that at Purfleet; we could be the outlier—they help to keep our local histories alive. That contribution cannot be measured in figures or footfall. Places such as Purfleet Heritage and Military Centre and the Thameside complex remind us to be proud of where we are from. They engage with schools, scout groups, cadets and guides, celebrate the legacies of local people and honour the efforts of extraordinary ordinary residents. Those stories would never find their way into a national exhibit. They are the histories of our grandparents and their grandparents, and they deserve to be remembered. They are keepers and tellers of our local story, and they contextualise it within our wider national story.

I want to finish by thanking the brilliant volunteers in the Gallery again. I have three questions for the Minister, actually—I want to encourage him to visit the rather fabulous Purfleet Military and Heritage Centre, where he will be sure of a very warm welcome and a lovely cup of tea. He will also be in the company of Benjamin Franklin, William Bligh, Captain Cook and Queen Victoria, who have all made the trip to Purfleet-on-Thames over the years. Most importantly, he will get the chance to learn about some of our fascinating local history.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Emma Lewell (in the Chair): With a time limit of four minutes on Back-Bench speeches, I call Dr Kieran Mullan.

1.42 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) on securing this debate, which I think may become a battle royale of whose constituency has the best museums. I will begin with Bexhill and Battle, which has a remarkable number of both local museums and national heritage sites. Let me take you on a tour of what we have to offer, Ms Lewell.

Bexhill Museum, founded in 1914, has been educating and inspiring the community for well over a century. It remains a traditional local museum run largely by

volunteers, yet it continues to thrive and evolve. It is currently completing the final stages of a comprehensive refurbishment made possible through a £390,000 grant from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport via Arts Council England in 2023. The museum holds an extraordinary and eclectic collection across four galleries, ranging from dinosaur footprints and Viking swords to a model of the town with a railway inherited from the Izzard family. It also has a restored 1895 fire engine, soon go on display. Around 1,500 schoolchildren visit each year, with a further 2,000 benefiting from loan boxes of artefacts and replicas used in the classroom. It even has a replica of the Bayeux tapestry.

That takes me a few short miles away to the historic town of Battle, most famously known as the site of the battle of Hastings in 1066, where we have the Battle Museum of Local History. Housed in the historic Almonry building, this volunteer-run museum complements the internationally significant Battle abbey, which is one of the most visited heritage sites in the country. The town's identity is naturally shaped by the events of 1066, but the museum rightly takes a broader approach, bringing together the collections and historical knowledge of the town while engaging the public in researching and understanding the area's wider story. Its displays explore topics ranging from the development of public health and medicine to the experiences of local residents during the second world war.

It does not stop there—we have museums in each and every corner of the constituency. In the west, we have Pevensey Courthouse Museum and Gaol. Current curator, Robert Slater, told me about the role that ultra-small local museums like that one play. They keep history alive not only through the stories of kings and battles, but through the ordinary lives of local people. Visitors to the courthouse can see coroner's records and records of those who fell foul of the law—facing anything from fines to public whipping—and stories of smuggling along the Sussex coast. What makes these museums truly special is the extraordinary commitment of local volunteers and trustees. Despite being run by volunteers, the Courthouse Museum welcomed nearly 5,500 visitors last year alone.

On the other side of the constituency is the Bright Foundation, founded by the Oscar-winning costume designer John Bright. Over the past 50 years, he has collaborated with and made costumes for a wide range of designers for productions ranging from "Pirates of the Caribbean" to "Downton Abbey". His generosity underpins the Bright Foundation, which includes the Barn Theatre and Museum. This remarkable local charity, based in Westfield, gives children and young people opportunities to engage with arts and creativity. It includes John Bright's toy museum, with a collection of more than 400 puppets, 400 dolls' houses, and even a trainset that was featured in the 1997 film "The Borrowers". With his support, the foundation engages more than 4,500 people a year, 44% of whom are in receipt of free school meals or have special educational needs.

However, the contribution of that museum, and others, is sometimes overlooked when budgets are being drawn up and limited resources are available. For example, for every £1 of revenue that Bexhill Museum receives from the Government, it has to generate £8 of its own through the work of the volunteers in the shop and so on.

I have a few questions for the Minister. To build on the excellent point from the hon. Member for Thurrock about small pots of money, we need transparency on

what local government actually spends in this respect. We also need to understand, at a time of local government reorganisation, how museums can sometimes fall between the cracks among the various responsibilities. The Government need to understand that museums are not just receivers of funding but parts of local government infrastructure that contribute to the economy and to jobs.

I will finish by thanking all the volunteers across all the museums in Bexhill and Battle who make such a fantastic contribution to our culture and heritage.

1.46 pm

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft). She is a passionate advocate for Thurrock, as she has demonstrated again today.

I am not sure whether my hon. Friend the Minister is a fan of "Dad's Army", but it was filmed in my hometown of Thetford. We have a fascinating museum full of "Dad's Army" memorabilia. I am sure it is for that reason alone that some of my constituents refer to me as, "You stupid boy." The museum is well worth a visit. There is a statue of Captain Mainwaring himself, and it brings visitors from far and wide to the town.

We also have the Charles Burrell Museum in Thetford, which focuses on the town's industrial heritage. The museum is housed in what was once the Burrell factory, where steam traction engines were produced before being shipped around the world, driving the industrial revolution. The museum is working hard to obtain formal accreditation. I pay tribute to the work of local Labour councillors Annie Blackburn and Doug Jefferson, who have worked so hard alongside other museum volunteers including Sheila Childerhouse, Will Bridgman, Teresia Stock and Richard Curtis. I hope that, following accreditation, they soon get the funding they need to repair and improve the museum, and I will continue to support them however I can. The recently announced heritage and museums funding made available by the Government will certainly be in their sights.

In Downham Market at the other side of my constituency there is the fantastic Discover Downham museum, which details the remarkable history of the area. The museum covers the history of the Clackclose hundred, which was one of Norfolk's ancient administrative divisions. It was a structure rooted deep in the Anglo Saxon era when the kingdom sought to organise justice, taxation and local governance through hundreds—probably a much simpler system than what we have today.

Local museums are not just a "nice to have". Tourism is the biggest economic driver in Norfolk. It contributes approximately £3.6 billion in value to the local economy and supports over 120,000 jobs, with roughly 20% of total employment in Norfolk and Suffolk linked to tourism. I am glad that the Government acknowledge the uniqueness of different areas of the UK and the importance of museums. I very much welcome the £1 billion cultural capital fund, which will go towards maintaining and improving regional museums and galleries. Through such measures, I hope we will be able to preserve local spirit and local history for future generations to come.

Rather than, "We are doomed," as Private Frazer may say, I say, "Don't panic"—be more Corporal Jones. With this Government, we are supporting local museums.

1.49 pm

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) on securing this debate.

North Yorkshire is blessed to have some of the UK's finest and quirkiest small museums, from the Richmondshire Museum and the Green Howards Museum, and the Workhouse, Courthouse and Prison & Police Museums in Ripon, to Nidderdale Museum in Pateley Bridge and the Royal Pump Room Museum in Harrogate, which outlines our spa town's history and heritage. A new, even smaller museum that I was unaware of until doing research for this debate is the New Park heritage centre. It tells the story of New Park, a suburb of Harrogate that began life as a tiny hamlet to house a gasworks—which served the neighbouring, more affluent High Harrogate and Low Harrogate—and its employees.

I also want to highlight the remarkable work of the team of volunteers behind Knaresborough Museum Association. They run the Knaresborough Heritage Centre, which I had the privilege of attending when it opened on the high street before the general election. Their work goes far beyond operating the museum, gallery and heritage centre: they have around 70 local volunteers who give their time and support to local schools to help with curriculum-linked workshops, and they run weekly heritage walks through Knaresborough, conduct original historical research and provide activities for groups of adults ranging from those with learning disabilities to people with early onset dementia.

All that highlights some of the fantastic work that our small museums can carry out. They are not just cultural assets: they are community anchors. They foster local pride, protect stories that might otherwise be lost and play a real role in our towns' visitor economies. That is why investment in local heritage matters so much.

Last year, I handed in a petition calling for a long-term package of support to restore and protect Knaresborough castle. If we want our towns to thrive, we must recognise that small museums, volunteer heritage groups and historic sites work together as part of the same local economy. With that in mind, what support can the Minister provide to fantastic assets like those in Harrogate and Knaresborough that I have outlined? Will he meet me to talk about my campaign to save Knaresborough castle? What steps is he taking to make the case to local authorities about the importance of our small museums?

1.51 pm

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for introducing this excellent debate. I am proud to represent a constituency shaped by 2,000 years of history—a history of conflict, dispute, industrial growth, people and, above all, resilience. Nowhere is that story told more vividly than in its museums.

At the heart of England's most northerly city stands Tullie House, Carlisle's museum, art gallery and community hub. It is a place proudly described as "a home for the eternally curious."

Tullie is run as an independent trust. It has nationally important collections of art, archaeology and natural sciences and, since 2017, it has been undergoing a transformation. The 2017 future plan has enabled the

museum to attract more than £14 million of investment to make the museum the heartbeat of the city's cultural life.

The development is being done in phases, and is supported by a broad range of investors including the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Collections and community are at the centre of the transformation strategy. The capital programme that Tullie is undertaking is part of a city-wide investment in Carlisle, with the Tullie initiative being fundamental to supporting communities and driving the visitor economy. Tullie is maximising its heritage to drive more tourists to explore our historic city, which also includes an outstanding Norman castle, a cathedral and the nearby Hadrian's wall.

However, pressure on local government funding is having a direct and immediate impact on Tullie. Tullie's Carlisle gallery explores the people and organisations that have shaped our city, its industrial heritage, social change and resilience, and our deep connection to the natural world. Beyond its galleries, Tullie has strengthened its role in the community, offering a new space for family activities, school workshops and exhibitions that ensure that heritage is accessible to everyone.

It was my pleasure to open the "Colour" exhibition at Tullie last September, which brought together Andy Warhol, bronze-age gold and the Rudd women, who once sold red stone for colouring the doorsteps of house-proud Carlisle residents. Our small local museums' ability to bring together internationally famous exhibits alongside locally significant artefacts is one of their strengths.

As befits a city seeking to be the UK's city of culture 2029, Tullie is not Carlisle's only museum. We also have a vintage motorcycle museum and the nearby Solway Aviation Museum—a Duxford for the north. It is volunteer-run, under the inspired leadership of museum chairman Dougie Kerr. There, visitors can see the Blackburn Beverly, a Fairey Gannet anti-submarine aircraft and a recently acquired Sea Harrier.

While we are on the subject of military service, no visit to Carlisle would be complete without stopping off at Carlisle castle, where Cumbria's Museum of Military Life can be found, offering exhibits on more than 300 years of our military heritage. It is all under the expert direction of museum director Jules Wooding, who not only secured a grant of almost a quarter of a million pounds from the National Lottery Heritage Fund last year, but plays an active role in supporting Carlisle's large veteran population every single month.

These museums exemplify the unique contribution that local museums make, not just to keeping the past alive, but to supporting our communities today and into the future.

1.55 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for leading the debate. She has done it again: she has brought an excellent debate to Westminster Hall. Whenever she speaks, she always draws a crowd, so well done to her—we can see the number of people here.

Local museums are terribly crucial for society. Far beyond the displaying of artefacts, they safeguard a community's history, traditions and collective memory—

I know that my community is so proud of ours. Northern Ireland in general, but specifically my constituency of Strangford, is steeped in culture and history. For being only 104 years old, we have made our mark in ensuring that future generations understand their roots.

There is currently a debate in the main Chamber about Commonwealth troops in the first world war. We have a museum at Conlig where we commemorate the battle of the Somme in particular, with the artefacts and all that goes with that. It opened in 1994, and was built with the help of grants to commemorate the involvement of the 36th (Ulster) Division, the 16th (Irish) Division and the 10th (Irish) Division. Since 2000, the museum has expanded to cover the second world war and other modern international conflicts. The museum has an extensive collection of materials from the great war, and in the last number of years has grown its collection of world war two artefacts, including with a large oral history archive.

I am very proud of what we have there. It is a much loved centre for all sorts of school and educational visits. I loved history at school—it was the only subject that I managed to do well in, to be honest. The fact of the matter is that children love history as well, and we should be teaching them all about it.

I should also mention the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), which has the Ulster Folk Museum, the Ulster Transport Museum and a museum to commemorate the Titanic. The Titanic Museum is where my staff member Ashley got married last year. She has now been married some 16 months and is still smiling, and that sounds pretty good.

The Ulster Folk Museum brings Ulster's rural and urban history to life, set over a large site with reconstructed buildings, streets and countryside scenes. There is even a section where people can watch proper Ulster soda bread being made. I do not know whether anyone knows what Ulster soda is, but there is nothing as nice as an Ulster soda that has been baked and cooked there and then, with a big dollop of butter on top. It really makes me feel that life is a good place to be. There is also the St Patrick Centre in Downpatrick, and the Schomberg Society in Kilkeel, which was formed in 1998 by a group of Ulster-Scots enthusiasts, of which I am one. There, we celebrate the culture, heritage, language and traditions from the kingdom of Mourne and beyond.

Museums partner directly with schools to align visits and activities with the national and local curriculum. This often piques the interest of young people, and gives them a vision of the industry offered. For me, that is mostly what museums are about: the young people of today learning for tomorrow. We can learn from history, and learn what history can teach us, and thereby hopefully not make the same mistakes that have been made many a time. It is also a fun way to learn—it is not sitting in a classroom, reading endless pages of history—and it is visual and interactive, giving children the opportunity to learn in a different way.

Many museums rely solely on grants and donations, and today's debate is a fantastic opportunity to remind the Government and the Minister in particular—it is lovely to see him in his place—of the need for long-term sustainability. Whether it be a museum here in London, a locally run museum in Belfast, the Somme Museum in Newtownards or anywhere else, they all deserve the opportunity to remain. I hope we can do more to protect them and properly fund them.

1.59 pm

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for securing this debate on local museums.

Local museums play a crucial role in our constituencies. They not only bring people to visit from all corners of the country and, indeed, the world, but strengthen the ties that bind us to where we live, giving us pride in the contributions that our homes have given to the world. Nowhere is that more evident than in the Kirkcaldy Galleries and War Memorial, which celebrated their centenary last year. They were the gift of John Nairn, whose family's linoleum-making business helped to make Kirkcaldy the linoleum capital of the world. He paid for the construction of the galleries, in memory of his only son, Ian Nairn, who was killed in the Somme in 1918.

The galleries building is one of the first things that people see as they leave the train station in Kirkcaldy and head to our town centre. The award-winning art galleries have a large collection of paintings by William McTaggart and Samuel Peploe, and have hosted exhibitions by Diane Arbus and Fife's very own Jack Vettriano, who was heavily influenced by the works on display in the galleries. As it is World Book Day today, it would be remiss of me not to mention the excellent children's library that is there, too, which my own kids spend many a happy hour in, usually looking for one particular Mr Men book or another.

The galleries also contain a first edition copy of Adam Smith's "The Wealth of Nations", which celebrates its 250th anniversary this year. The father of economics was born and grew up in Kirkcaldy; there is a commemorative plaque on the high street marking his mother's house, where he completed writing that book. Adam Smith's titanic legacy has been preserved by the excellent work of the Adam Smith Global Foundation, which manages the heritage centre and Adam Smith Close, where the stones mark significant events in Smith's life, by the Old Kirk where Smith was baptised.

The Minister will be aware of concerns that Church leaders have expressed about the closure of the listed places of worship scheme; I wonder whether he might address those concerns in his response. While I have him here, I must also take the chance to give my utmost support to Kirkcaldy's bid to be UK town of culture 2028. I am sure that all hon. Members present will agree that it would be a worthy winner. The bid has been led by the Lang Toun Partners, formed by the Adam Smith Global Foundation and other fantastic organisations from our town.

Our town has so much going on, but it is a well-kept secret to too many outside the Lang Toun. It is time that we shouted louder, so I am delighted to support the bid to cement our position on the cultural map and make Kirkcaldy the UK's town of culture for 2028.

I would also like to mark the important contributions of Burntisland Heritage Trust, who do so much to celebrate Burntisland and preserve its important history, as well as the excellent Museum of Communication in Burntisland.

Finally, with International Women's Day taking place this weekend, I end by recognising the work of Jennie Lee, who grew up in my constituency, in Cowdenbeath.

[Melanie Ward]

Jennie was the UK's first ever Minister for the Arts. She trebled Arts Council funding, was a strong supporter of regional and national arts, and founded the Open University. Jennie's legacy is truly one to be proud of. Perhaps the Minister finds her as much of an inspiration as I do. Her picture hangs in my office and I take inspiration from her important work every day that I sit in this place.

2.3 pm

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for securing this debate today.

Our local museums are at the heart of our communities. I am incredibly lucky to have important museums in my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent South that proudly champion our pottery heritage—Gladstone Pottery Museum and World of Wedgwood. Museums are not just about the past; they can be living museums that illustrate our past, present, and indeed our future—a point that I hope to illustrate through those two museums.

For generations, our famous tableware brands have crafted household favourites and shipped bespoke British products all over the world. From Wedgwood to Gluggle Jug, our companies were and are at the centre of the world's pottery industry. That is what makes us the Potteries.

Gladstone Pottery Museum in Longton showcases the skills, craftsmanship and economic contribution made and curated by local people. Gladstone is the only complete Victorian pottery factory in the country set within a preserved coal-fired factory with traditional bottle ovens. I am sure that hon. Members will be familiar with—and not just because I talk about it all the time—“The Great British Pottery Throwdown” on Channel 4, which Gladstone Pottery Museum proudly hosts and which draws in visitors and TV presenters from across the world. That shows the importance of museums to tourism and the local economy.

Visitors to Gladstone can watch live demonstrations of traditional crafts, explore galleries showcasing historic ceramics, tiles and sanitaryware and learn about the pottery-making process from clay to finished products. Visitors gain an incredible insight into what working conditions were like for the men, women and children who powered the pottery industry throughout the Victorian era. The museum is sited in Longton; there are many working potteries and china companies around Longton, including Susan Rose, Gluggle Jug and, further away, 1882 Ltd. Many of their skills are heritage skills, which we need. They were developed in, for example, Gladstone pottery, and are now used in places such as Mantec, an advanced ceramics company. In its research laboratory, one can see a big view of Gladstone Pottery Museum. The skills used at Gladstone are now being used to make parts for jet engines. I find that very iconic.

A short drive away is the World of Wedgwood, an award-winning tourist destination and living museum that has the V&A Wedgwood collection and a working factory. Wedgwood's founder, Josiah Wedgwood, was an incredible innovator and entrepreneur who invented creamware, green glaze and much more, and helped to drive the industrial revolution. Sadly, given the pressures of today, the Wedgwood factory is in discussions to reduce production and make redundancies. The financial sustainability of the World of Wedgwood and its factory

is vital. This is about not just the factory workers and the skills but local hospitality such as Lunar restaurant and other shops, which we must try to save.

It is precisely because I wish to save those places and create jobs that I want to support the project for the Lunar Gardens—a cultural destination that would draw on heritage while engaging with the future of the industry. It would include residencies and studios for creative work, a training centre for heritage crafts skills, continued industrial ceramics production, a park and an adventure-themed forest playground, as well as a contemporary art gallery.

The proposal would not only promote our proud heritage and boost local tourism but create employment and education opportunities at the working factories. Before I close, I should also say that Longton is also putting in a bid to be town of culture. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the Lunar Gardens project and support for Wedgwood, to develop its business case and keep this important museum open?

2.7 pm

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for the opportunity to debate this hugely important issue.

Dinosaurs, Egyptian mummified people, a bronze age boat, Viking weaponry, rare native animal species, jet engines, rockets, a working modern railway, the remains of the world's first factory and the largest collection of works by the Enlightenment artist Joseph Wright of Derby can all be seen in Derby museums. Some of the Wright collection is currently up the road at the National Gallery, but it will be back in Derby in June. My children's favourite are the Egyptian mummies, which prompted my five-year-old's recent demand that at Halloween, her mummy has to be wrapped up as a mummy—I have a lot to be thankful for. My children are three of the nearly 15,000 schoolchildren who visit Derby museums each year.

Derby is blessed with museums, including Derby Museum and Art Gallery, the Museum of Making at the Derby silk mill—a UNESCO world heritage site and the location of the world's first factory—and Pickford's House. Given that so many of our regional museums have faced financial difficulties because of 15 years of reductions in funding from local councils—the result of the previous Government's austerity policy—I was delighted that Derby Museums trust received £800,000 from the Government's museum renewal fund via the Arts Council England last year.

In addition, Derby also has the National Sikh Heritage Centre and the Derby Computer Museum, which has loads of computers from the '80s and '90s. People can have some hands-on, retro fun there by playing a game on an old Nintendo, writing basic software on a BBC or loading games from tape on an old Sinclair—it is even harder to tear my husband away from there than it is my children.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock for securing this debate, because regional museums are vital to the renewal of town and city centres, and provide places of inspiration and curiosity on people's doorsteps. Derby museums welcome over a quarter of a million visitors each year and are vital to our visitor economy.

I conclude by saying to my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock that the Dracula that we would all recognise was in fact made in Derby. One hundred and one years ago, Bram Stoker's "Dracula" was staged in Derby, and for the first time appeared as the charming, sophisticated vampire, with his trademark cloak and cane, that became a cultural icon. I thank Derby Museums trust, the QUAD and, particularly, the University of Derby, as well as many other partners, for their work in reclaiming Dracula as a son of Derby. If she and the Minister bite at the invitation, they could attend the international Dracula conference in Derby next year.

2.10 pm

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) on securing today's debate. In my constituency of West Dunbartonshire, local history and strong ties to our past have shaped our communities and towns. In post-industrial areas such as mine, stories of the past are closely linked to identity, pride and local history.

We have a rich industrial heritage, particularly in shipbuilding, distilling and textiles. Local museums remind people of their place in history, while attracting tourism, allowing us to share our story and support the local economy. We are fortunate to have several local museums in my constituency, each offering fascinating insights into our past through social history and local stories. West Dunbartonshire's story is one of innovation and craftsmanship.

Dumbarton castle, owned by Historic Environment Scotland, is one of the greatest visitor attractions of my constituency, and one of only three royal castles in Scotland. Covering 1,500 years of recorded history and military use as recently as the second world war, the "Rock of Ages" exhibition in the Governor's House Museum connects visitors with artefacts that tell stories of resilience throughout history. For centuries, Dumbarton has stood as a place of strategic importance, later becoming home to the renowned Denny's shipyard, the engineers of which built celebrated vessels, including the famous Cutty Sark.

In the last surviving building of the Denny's shipyards sits the Scottish Maritime Museum, known locally as the Denny Tank Museum—a reminder of the area's rich shipbuilding and engineering heritage. Visitors can learn about the Denny ship model experiment tank, the world's first commercial ship model testing tank. It is an example of engineering heritage that can inspire the engineers of tomorrow.

In Alexandria, the Vale of Leven Heritage Centre, located beneath the newly renovated library, tells another chapter of our story: textile print blocks, Turkey red cottons and the Argyll motor works. Run by dedicated volunteers and supported by West Dunbartonshire council, it reflects the passion of local people to preserve their history.

Clydebank Museum reopened after refurbishment in August and stands in testament to West Dunbartonshire's industrial strength and community spirit. The nationally recognised Singer collection tells the story not only of sewing machines that transformed domestic life, but of generations of families such as mine whose livelihoods were tied to the factory floor. Singer's factory was where my father worked.

Maritime art and model ships recall a town that built vessels for the world, while exhibits such as "John Brown's shipyard" honour iconic liners, such as the Queen Mary, the Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Elizabeth II and the Royal Yacht Britannia—all of which were Clydebank-built. By bringing these stories together, the museum preserves our past, and shows why continued investment in local museums matters.

At the heart of Dumbarton high street stands Glencairn House, the town's oldest surviving building, built in 1623 for the seventh Earl of Glencairn. It will be opened to the public this April after a £7.2 million transformation, supported by the UK Government and funded jointly by West Dunbartonshire council and the UK Government. It will serve as a modern combined library and local history museum in the centre of town. The Minister could visit in April, and perhaps even open it. It will bring footfall to local businesses, renewed pride for residents and a reminder that our past belongs at the heart of our communities.

Local museums must be seen as an essential investment in identity, education and local economic vitality. West Dunbartonshire's story, from ancient rock fortress to global shipbuilding powerhouse, reflects Britain's story. Let us ensure that local museums have the support they need to keep telling it.

2.14 pm

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Lewell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) on securing this debate on such an important issue, which matters to communities across our country. I thank her for mentioning Captain Cook, who is my constituent—give or take three centuries. I have to disagree with her on one point: I represent the neighbouring constituency to Whitby, which is, of course, a fantastic tourist destination—second only to those slightly further up the coast in my patch.

One of those destinations is the village of Skinningrove, which is just on the edge of the North sea. In that village stands Land of Iron, the leading ironstone mining museum in the country. It is built on the site of the old Loftus mine, which was the first mine to open in the Cleveland area, in 1865. Cleveland's ironstone travelled across the world from our region and was part of the industrial revolution. The bridges, railways and ships of the industrial age carried the mark of the people who laboured under our cliffs and hills. Today, Land of Iron holds the largest collection of ironstone mining artefacts in the country, telling that story of graft, ingenuity and pride. It hopes one day to be designated as the national ironstone mining museum. I am proud to support it in that fight, and I hope the Minister will commit to meet me to discuss it.

A little further inland, in Stewart Park in Marton, stands the Captain Cook Birthplace Museum, marking the spot where Middlesbrough's most famous son first saw the world before going on to chart much of it. Ahead of the tricentenary of his birth in 2028, I look forward to working with the museum and the many volunteers who tell that story to make sure that we commemorate the moment appropriately.

Both museums are cherished locally, yet both have faced financial uncertainty in recent years. As Members across the Chamber have mentioned, that issue affects

[Luke Myer]

many of our museums across the country, whether they are independent and volunteer-run or run by local authorities. My point to the Minister today is simple: places like these may be small in scale, but they are enormous in meaning for our communities. They keep alive the memory of the communities that built modern Britain, and they deserve support to allow them to keep their doors open for the next generation. I look forward to working with Ministers, our two councils—Middlesbrough, and Redcar and Cleveland—and the museums themselves to maintain our heritage and tell our story for years into the future.

2.17 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Lewell. What a wonderful debate we have had this afternoon. From Egyptian mummies and vampires to castles and royal pump houses, from the history of textiles and shipbuilding to Captain Cook and the Cutty Sark, the whole colourful history of our country has passed through our mind's eye this afternoon.

We all agree that local museums are cultural anchors that connect people, place and history. Museums support our local economy by driving tourism, creating jobs and encouraging visitors, but foremost they are there for the enjoyment of the people who live near them. In 2023, the independent museum sector alone contributed nearly £900 million to the UK economy and attracted almost 20 million visitors.

The sector supports thousands of jobs, alongside more than half a million volunteer days. It is important to dwell on the volunteers; of course they provide an important local service for all of us, but they also love what they do, and they are so connected to their local place. In Bath, we are so fortunate to have a plethora of museums—large, such as the Roman baths, and small, such as the Museum of Bath Stone. Together, they celebrate our rich heritage and tell the story of our people.

The Museum of Bath at Work is a particular standout. That independent, self-funded museum is housed in a grade II listed real tennis court. It operates with just one permanent member of staff, but is supported by over 40 volunteers, including working trustees and friends. Last year, it staged an exhibition on tennis in Bath, which won a national sporting heritage award for research. This year, it is planning exhibitions in cinema and film. All that is done without a single penny of financial support from the Government.

The Roman baths are so popular that they received a 93% enjoyment score—whatever that is, and however it is measured—which is the highest ever. Victoria Art Gallery celebrated its 125th anniversary this year and made major investments, including the launch of a dedicated community engagement and school room. Bath council is in the process of bringing together £54 million for a new fashion museum in Bath—I am particularly excited about that, because I like fashion. It will hopefully open in 2030 and will be a fabulous place to show the transformative power of fashion, stimulate the local and regional economy, and inspire citizens like me. I am sure I will be one of the first through the doors. We have to remember that fashion is not just for the people with money, but what do every day—we wear clothes and we create fashion.

We also have the American Museum, which is set within 125 acres of outstanding natural beauty. Apart from telling the history of America in a very engaging way, it showcases colourful and beautiful American decorative arts to UK audiences and helps to reduce the perception that we have of America as a bang-bang culture of cowboys—I blame Hollywood for that. That mission is all the more important today.

In Bath we are so lucky, but the picture nationally is far more sober. Decades of local authority funding cuts leave local museums unable to open their doors or plan for the future. As non-statutory services, museums are too often the first to go. Councils face impossible funding choices. Spending on museums fell by 27% between 2009 and 2020—a shocking legacy of the last Conservative Government. A study published by the Mapping Museums Lab documented that, across the UK, over 500 museums have closed in the last 25 years.

When such valuable cultural assets vanish, it affects some of the most disadvantaged in our society. Children from more deprived backgrounds are already significantly less likely to visit museums. They are less likely to have parents who take them, to attend a school with the budget for trips, and to live near a major national museum, so the small local museum might be the only point of cultural contact available to them. If such museums are forced to close, we are not just losing buildings; we are pulling up the ladder and telling whole communities that their history does not merit preservation, that culture is something that happens elsewhere and that heritage is only for those with money.

The economic case for keeping our museums open is compelling, and the social case is equally strong. Museums improve wellbeing, reduce social isolation and strengthen community cohesion, and volunteers find community and purpose in them—but I want to dwell on education. Local museums offer something that national institutions cannot: proximity. A child visiting a local museum is not learning about history in the abstract; they are learning about the people who lived in their own town or city, worked their land and built their streets. That sense of belonging to a story that stretches back centuries matters enormously for how young people understand themselves and their place in the world. Many schools build museum visits into their curriculum because they are fun and different from what happens in a classroom. Many schools' trips are now under enormous pressure, but trips to the local museum are inexpensive. It may be the only cultural institution that a child visits all year, and for some children it will be the first time they have been to a museum.

In this country, culture is not equally distributed. Access to museums, galleries, theatres and heritage sites is closely linked to income and social background. We need a fair deal for funding local authorities that properly reflects the value of cultural services. The Government must place far greater emphasis on heritage and local history as a public good. Every community deserves a museum. Every child deserves access to their heritage. That should not depend on where they live, how much money their family has or whether enough volunteers can hold things together for just one more year. I urge the Government to act before more of our local museum treasures are lost for good.

2.23 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. What an inspiring tour we have had of museums up and down the nation. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for securing the debate and inspiring speeches about so many opportunities. She mentioned everything from Zeppelins to Gurkhas. I do not think anyone was expecting an argument over who owned Dracula—certainly something for us to get our teeth into. *[Interruption.]* I apologise.

More importantly, I thank the hon. Member for giving me the opportunity to promote and champion the museums in my constituency. The Museum of Farnham, Haslemere Educational Museum and the Rural Life Living Museum in Tilford are not only recognised throughout Surrey and Hampshire but attract visitors from far and wide. People are drawn by the rich local history that they preserve and the way that they celebrate and bring to life the heritage of our local market towns.

Museums are deeply valued by the public. Some 89% of UK adults believe that museums are important to our national culture—I do not really understand what the other 11% are thinking, but never mind—and three quarters agree that having a local museum adds real value to their area. Indeed, 54% of people say that they would feel “disappointed” if their local museum were to close and 41% say that they would feel “genuinely sad” at such a loss.

Over the past 25 years, under Governments of all colours, about 138 independent non-profit museums and 152 private museums closed, while 418 independent non-profit museums and a further 209 museums opened. That tells us two things: the sector faces real pressures, but it also shows remarkable resilience, and there is such enthusiasm for local museums and heritage. Each museum is different. Some are run by charities, others by local authorities, universities, the armed forces or Government-sponsored bodies. The sector supports about 33,000 jobs and has more than 93,000 volunteers. Yet, increasingly, museums are forced to diversify their activities and income simply to stay afloat as costs continue to rise.

The challenges facing museums are clear at the Rural Life Living Museum in my constituency. It began as a private collection in 1968 and has grown into a significant open-air museum in Tilford, with about 40,000 objects and 20 historical buildings that bring 19th and 20th-century rural Britain vividly to life. My family and I thoroughly enjoy visiting the museum, in particular with its open-air, hands-on approach and the volunteers who quite literally inhabit that history. They immerse visitors through working demonstrations at the forge, in the woodyard and along the narrow-gauge railway. The museum operates entirely on ticket sales and donations, but with costs rising faster than income, its future is far from certain. Sadly, that story is being repeated in museums across the country, as we have heard from several hon. Members today.

We see similar pressures in Farnham, where the Museum of Farnham sits at the heart of a vibrant and creative community and celebrates the town’s long artistic and craft heritage, recognised in 2020 when Farnham was designated a world craft city. The Haslemere Educational Museum benefits from the expertise of individuals such as Richard Sabin, a trustee of the museum but also the

principal curator of mammals at the Natural History Museum in London. The museum in Haslemere specialises in human history, natural history and geology, and provides invaluable educational opportunities for local schools through key stages 1 to 4.

Some of my fondest childhood memories involve being taken to the Haslemere museum by my parents to see Arthur the Siberian bear and the 2,500-year-old mummy, with its toes visible through the bandages—I encourage the hon. Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson) to bring her children to see another mummy. For a small boy, that was extraordinary. The museum was founded in 1888, but this year marks 100 years on the High Street site. It launches a centenary appeal this evening—I appeal to the Minister, because I am sure any donation that the Government were to give would be welcome.

More nationally, local museums play a vital role in our communities and in education. Under the Conservative Government, following publication of the culture White Paper, the Mendoza review was launched. In the public consultation that followed, 85% of the more than 1,200 respondents agreed that museums and galleries are primary places for education. The review led directly to the establishment of the museums estate and development fund, which distributed about £100 million in grants to support essential repair and renovation work. The levelling-up fund, shared prosperity fund and towns fund also provided much needed investment in museums and, during the extraordinary challenge of covid-19, the £1.57 billion culture recovery fund safeguarded the UK’s heritage, with £296 million specifically supporting museums, heritage sites and historical places.

I am proud of that record—the practical support, serious investment and clear commitment to protecting our cultural heritage that the previous Government showed. Unfortunately, by contrast, Labour’s first tranche of funding, announced in summer 2024, disproportionately benefited national museums. Those institutions are already protected by grant in aid and are largely insulated from the financial pressures facing local authorities. Meanwhile, the smaller museums that form the backbone of local cultural life are left to struggle.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan) stated, many of our local museums are charity-run or heavily reliant on local funding. They often occupy historical buildings that are expensive to maintain, difficult to modernise and in urgent need of repair. In Farnham, for example, the repair bill for a relatively modest museum building has already reached £2 million. When council budgets are squeezed, culture is often the first thing to be cut. At the same time, many charity-run museums face falling donations, fewer volunteers and rising operating costs, including higher employment costs and increased national insurance contributions introduced by this Government.

In short, the pressures are growing, but the support is not. The result is that smaller museums are left exposed. Too many lack the staff, time or specialist expertise needed to navigate complex funding systems, co-ordinate bids or build partnerships with larger national institutions.

When public money is spent, it must be spent wisely. Last year in Wales, the National Museum Cardiff reportedly faced a £4.5 million deficit, yet at the same time taxpayers’ money was spent on exhibitions such as “The Dynamic”, which explored radical newspaper culture, alongside

[Gregory Stafford]

displays of Extinction Rebellion posters. It is entirely reasonable to ask whether institutions facing serious financial pressures should prioritise political activism over the core mission of preserving and presenting the nation's history and heritage. Museums should bring communities together around shared culture and shared history. That must remain the central purpose, especially when budgets are tight and buildings are in need of repair.

Jen Craft: Does the hon. Gentleman not think that political activism is part of our nation's story and of local history in certain places? The People's History Museum in Manchester springs to mind at the top of the list, but there are many more. Activism and political interest form the path of our nation and our local history.

Gregory Stafford: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. It is rare that we agree on anything, so she will be slightly disappointed now. There is a distinct difference between looking back at movements and discourse that happened in the past and what that museum was doing: promoting a political cause of the moment.

I want to ask the Minister three questions. First, have the Government considered ringfencing local authority funding for cultural purposes in order to safeguard local museums? Secondly, what practical support is available to smaller museums to help them to navigate funding applications, manage financial risk and collaborate more effectively with national institutions? Finally, how do the Government intend to encourage private and corporate philanthropy beyond the major cities—for example, through place-based giving incentives, as suggested in the Hodge review?

Our museums are not just custodians of the past, but living educational and cultural resources at the heart of our communities. They deserve practical support to ensure they can continue to thrive, educate and inspire future generations.

2.32 pm

The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray): It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair again, Ms Lewell. I do not know what you have done to upset someone—you are in the Chair constantly—but thank you very much indeed for chairing this debate. It is a great pleasure to respond to it.

I echo the congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) on securing the debate. What a tremendous champion for her constituency she is. We could probably conclude the debate now with me saying that Edinburgh is the permanent city of culture in this country—it does not need a prize to be told that; it has some of the best museums. We could put that to a debate if Members so wish.

My hon. Friend is right to highlight the tremendous value of local museums, history and culture in our constituencies. The Purfleet Heritage and Military Centre, which we have heard a lot about, is an excellent example of a museum working for and with its local community. It tells the varied local histories of its community with pride, from Purfleet's national impact as a key player in the UK's military and industrial story, to the town's links to Bram Stoker and Dracula—although we have

heard some debate about whether it is indeed the home of Dracula. That is not to forget the museum's sell-out ghost tours. I think I have seen an advert saying that tickets are still available for the tours coming up at Halloween.

The Purfleet Heritage and Military Centre achieves all that without any paid staff at all; it is entirely volunteer-led, like 30% of museums in England. I pay tribute to the immense contribution that volunteers make in sustaining our local museums, transmitting local history and identity to new generations, and preserving our proud heritage. I congratulate those volunteers—Trevor, Polly, Ollie, Sylak, Jeff, Phillip, Claire, Yvette, and, of course, Alan and Sue Gosling—and thank them for all they do for the Purfleet Heritage and Military Centre. Alan has passed away, but he left a significant legacy. I thank them for all they do.

As noteworthy as Purfleet is, I am pleased to say that it is not an isolated case across the country. Today, I have had the privilege of outlining the vital role that museums up and down the country play in celebrating our local and national stories. As civic institutions, integral to our national and local cultural life, they are hugely valuable as places of learning, community and, of course, entertainment. This Government are committed to championing our local museums, and to working in partnership with councils and communities across the country to see them flourish for the future.

John Slinger: On my right hon. Friend's point about working closely with local councils, will he join me in congratulating Rugby borough council on its work in running the superb Rugby Art Gallery and Museum? It is currently exhibiting its entire art collection as well as a history of Rugby in 50 objects, and is planning an exciting expansion in the coming years. I am sure its staff would be very grateful if my right hon. Friend might get on the West Coast Main Line and visit to see their excellent work and their plans to reach out even more effectively to our community in future.

Ian Murray: I can certainly congratulate everyone in Rugby, and especially at the museum, on that particular project. Throughout the course of this debate, I have been invited to a number of museums across the country. I am very happy to report that it is not my ministerial responsibility, so I will accept all those visits on behalf of Baroness Twycross in the other place; I am sure she will have a lovely time touring the country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) mentioned the Brunel Museum and the work that it does. I was struck by the fact that it has the very first boring machine in Britain, and by that did in terms of building under the Thames, and all that infrastructure of the industrial revolution. Now, I would perhaps suggest that my hon. Friend is the very definition of a boring machine, and that is why I think he quite rightly represents the Brunel Museum.

Neil Coyle: Ms Lewell, given all the references to Dracula, I am tempted to point out what a shame it is that none of the bloodsuckers from Reform is here. Given the point the Minister has just made, I invite him—and colleagues—to visit the Golden Hinde in my constituency. We have corresponded regarding the Golden Hinde, because it has been the pearl of Bankside in

Southwark for 30 years, and next year is the 450th anniversary of the original Golden Hinde setting sail—the first British vessel to circumnavigate the globe. However, because of its unique status, the Golden Hinde struggles to access funds. Can the Minister outline how he is expanding the museum renewal fund and working with the British Business Bank to ensure that such unique museums can access resources and continue their fantastic work in communities such as mine? I hope that was not too boring a point.

Ian Murray: My hon. Friend proves my point! But yes, he raises a key point about funding for not just large and national museums, but local ones. We have been trying to put together a package of measures for museums and for culture across the whole country, consisting of everything that is written into the creative industries sector plan.

The key part there is for the British Business Bank to look at new financial models to help museums and the cultural and creative parts of the industry, but it is also about philanthropy and making sure that we have that corporate sponsorship as well. There is also public funding through Arts Council England and the money that DCMS is directly putting into museums.

Of course, a key part of that is local authorities, which have been hollowed out over the last 15 years. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) was right to mention that culture—including museums—is one of the first things to fall off a local authority's agenda when it is struggling to pay for key statutory services. Those are all things that this Government are trying to fix, but I am very happy to talk to my hon. Friend further about the Golden Hinde in particular.

This Government believe that arts and culture should be available to everyone, everywhere, regardless of background and location. We are committed to broadening access to culture so that everyone has the opportunity to explore our shared heritage and feel connected in some way. We have heard that from right across the country today, so I will just concentrate on a few of the contributions that have been made.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock was correct in the way she presented this issue on behalf of her communities. She asked a number of questions about recognising the value of small museums and making more small grants available. I can tell her that small museums are an essential part of our national tapestry of museums and we very much recognise that as a Department. Indeed, 40% of all museums are small attractions with fewer than 10,000 visitors, and our funding streams must reflect that in what we are trying to achieve.

Our museum estate and development—or MEND—fund is open to museums of all sizes. Capital grants do require some paperwork, but the Hodge review into Arts Council England, which my hon. Friend will be aware of, is considering a proportionate application process for smaller museums, particularly those run by volunteers, to try to ensure that it is as easy and streamlined as possible for the very smallest museums and organisations to apply for those kinds of funds. That is very much at the forefront of our mind.

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan) and I discussed this topic in last week's Adjournment debate on the Bayeux tapestry, and he is absolutely right

to showcase what his part of the country does for our culture and heritage. He also talked about the transparency of funding, reorganisation and infrastructure in local authorities, which the Hodge review deals with very clearly. I appreciate that not all museums are part of Arts Council England, and there is a process to become accredited. We must ensure that local authorities regularly produce plans on updating arts, culture and museums, so that the public can then hold them to account. We are actively considering that matter in response to the Hodge review.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy) mentioned “Dad’s Army”—I think “Don’t tell him, Pike!” was the other quote. Indeed, the statue of Captain Mainwaring in his constituency is fantastic, and it shows the real breadth of what we are talking about: ranging all the way from “Dad’s Army” to Dracula and industrial heritage, as well as all the other things that museums do so well.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) talked about how museums help town centres to thrive, and that is key to regenerating them. He asked about a meeting about saving Knaresborough castle; my hon. Friend in the other place, Baroness Twycross, would be delighted to meet him, and I will ensure that it happens.

My hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) highlighted how the Tullie House museum is an international home for curation. It is also near to Hadrian’s wall, which I have a special interest in: I think that we should preserve Hadrian’s wall, or even build it a bit higher—some of my nationalist colleagues would certainly agree with that. I also congratulate my hon. Friend on her lobbying for Durham to be city of culture.

I know that DCMS officials had the pleasure of attending the reopening of Tullie House following the remarkable makeover that we heard about this afternoon. I hear that the museum’s new galleries fantastically showcase the area’s history, and that its nationally important history collections, reorganised by the Arts Council, are of outstanding significance—congratulations on that and on the funding that has been put in.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) does not miss an opportunity to participate in these debates; he talked about the Titanic museum, and his titanic contributions should surely mean that he has an exhibition there. I am sure that every Member would be delighted to visit the special exhibition, “Jim Shannon has intervened in the Adjournment debate”, and see what that has to offer. He is a great champion for Northern Ireland’s museums and culture.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward) is looked on with admiration and envy by a lot of colleagues for the way in which she has championed her local area and secured £20 million to transform Kirkcaldy city centre, due to her tenacity in representing her constituents. She talked about how local museums keep that local history alive, mentioning Adam Smith and Jennie Lee. I know that the Jennie Lee lecture is now part of the suite of things that the DCMS does, so I am very keen to take that forward.

My hon. Friend specifically mentioned the campaign by church leaders in Scotland on the places of worship fund. I would like to spend 30 seconds on this subject, because I think it is really important, as church buildings

[*Ian Murray*]

are part of our heritage. The Government extended the listed places of worship scheme to 31 March this year, or until the £23 million figure is exhausted. That was a VAT reclaim scheme of up to £25,000, with an average claim of about £3,000, but that has now been exhausted.

We have replaced that scheme with the £92 million places of worship renewal fund, but that applies only to England, and the Scottish part of the churches renewal fund is a devolved function for the Scottish Government. The £92 million that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport has put into this new fund comes from our departmental budget in the spending review, so the Barnett consequential will also have come as part of the spending review. We are spending that budget; if the Scottish Government wish to replicate the VAT reclaim scheme, or introduce a new scheme for Scottish churches, they have the power and the money to do so. I would encourage Scottish churches to get in touch with the Scottish Government on that matter.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Does the Minister share my concern that, rather than increasing funding for Historic Environment Scotland, the Scottish Government appear to have cut it by £3.7 million in last week's Budget?

Ian Murray: The key thing is that responsibility lies with the Scottish Government, and it is for them to determine how they spend the money. I am very clear in acknowledging and understanding the concerns of Scottish churches about no longer having access to the UK-wide VAT reclaim scheme. The UK Government have introduced a scheme for England, and the Scottish Government have to determine how they spend their budget, and whether they introduce a scheme for Scotland. However, based on the Budget they have just passed, they seem to have reduced the funding for historical places, rather than increase it. I encourage all those in the Scottish diaspora to get in touch with the Scottish Government to push the Culture Secretary to replace that scheme.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) represents the centre of the world for the Potteries. I feel as if I live in Longton, I have heard so much about it in the lobbying that is going on for town of culture. I am very happy to be bribed further.

Dr Mullan: The right hon. Member helpfully reminds me that I forgot to mention that Bexhill is also putting itself forward for town of culture. I am happy to bribe him any time.

Ian Murray: Sir Phil Redmond is chairing the panel to determine which will be the first town of culture, and I do not envy his task. I met him last week, and we went through the number of applications—it is not public yet, but it is significant. It probably covers the constituencies of almost half the Members of Parliament. It is going to be tough. We may need to come together, across parties and as a Parliament, to celebrate everywhere that has entered the competition to make sure they get something out of it. Winning is important, but the process of taking part will help arts and culture right across the country.

Wera Hobhouse: Since we have a little time, we should congratulate the whole sector for making museums so much more engaging and fun. I remember being dragged to museums when I was young. They were boring places to be, and I could just about survive for half an hour. These days, museums are places where people really want to stay, because the whole sector has been transformed into something with which everybody can engage. We should take this opportunity to congratulate the museum sector for all it has done in the last generation.

Ian Murray: We should congratulate everyone involved. The way that we curate and develop museums is renowned across the world. Many countries look to the UK for the expertise to build their own capability, because we do the best museums and exhibitions in the world and have the best skills. Congratulations to all of them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South wants to talk about the Lunar Gardens project. Baroness Twycross will be delighted to talk to her about that, and we will make sure my hon. Friend has an appropriate meeting in place as soon as possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson) talked about her three children, and how museums are a key component of the local community and education. She also talked about entertainment and telling the stories of the past that shaped future generations. I have a five-year-old and a one-year-old, and my five-year-old loves being in museums. He loves looking at the exhibitions, but he loves just being in big spaces he can enjoy and run around in. I do not know if Dracula is a son of Derby, but it is something that we should perhaps debate further, maybe in an Adjournment debate with the lights out.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Douglas McAllister) is absolutely right that Denny's shipyard built the Cutty Sark, and it celebrates the proud innovation and heritage of shipbuilding on the Clyde. It might not be an entirely accurate statistic, but I think I am right in saying that, 150 years ago, 90% of the ships sailing anywhere in the world were built either on the Clyde or somewhere near the Clyde. That innovation and heritage has to be respected and celebrated. He rightly talked about the local pride of maintaining and developing local museums that tell local stories. I think the statistics show that 89% of adults say that museums are important to their local pride and local culture.

My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer) said that Captain Cook would probably have been a constituent 300 years ago. I would probably describe him as an L5Y—only half the Chamber will know what I am talking about. Again, Baroness Twycross will be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to talk about some of the issues he has with museums in his constituency. He said something important that sums up the whole debate: "Some museums are small in scale but enormous in impact." That is great for telling local stories. It is the impact on young people, schools and heritage that he is talking about. He also talked about the Land of Iron getting a national title. Arts Council England, via accreditation, will consider all requests from museums to become nationally styled where they have a strong story and strong case to make.

On the Captain Cook Museum, Middlesbrough council museums were awarded £240,000 from the museum renewal fund last year, and the Land of Iron was

awarded a MEND grant worth £650,000 in February last year, so we are supporting those museums. For the hon. Member for Bath, we had 93% satisfaction for her speech as well. She talked about what is happening with the Bath museums, and she talked about museums closing and the delicate position that many local museums, particularly smaller ones, are in.

I do not want to diminish the seriousness of a lot of the stories we have heard about our local museums, but an independent academic study has found that since 2000 the number of museums in the UK has risen. Despite the 500 closures since 2000, there have been more new museums in the UK, although it has plateaued since about 2015-16. There is a lot of work to do, but it is not all bad news in our museum sector. Arts Council England supports the museums and schools programme with £1.2 million a year to make sure it happens.

It is wonderful that the shadow Minister has some Dracula jokes, but they are so old that perhaps they should be in a museum themselves. However, museums need local authority funding. We should not turn this into a political debate, as it has been so collegiate today, but the last Government, during their 14 years in power, completely and utterly decimated local authority funding right across the country. That was the starting point for culture and arts to be diminished—they are not statutory, so they fall away.

On the Hodge review, Arts Council England has been looking not only at how local authorities can be better supported but at how they can be better held to account for what they do on arts and culture. Hopefully, the review will come through and we can respond very soon.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford), made a strange point about freedom of speech and editorial freedom. I do not think it is for the Government or the Opposition, or indeed any politician, to tell museums how they should celebrate our heritage. Many of the political issues we are dealing with today relate to the past. Some of the best museums in the world that I have visited address political issues such as slavery, and we should make sure that we maintain that approach. Actually, a lot of the stories we tell in politics today are not new—they are stories of the past—and I hope the public engage with them, and the public will determine whether they are good things to reflect.

Gregory Stafford: I think I made the point very clearly to the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft), but I will repeat it now. My concern is not about museums representing accurately what happened in the past—that is obvious. What I am against is museums using taxpayers' money to push a current political cause. Extinction Rebellion is not a historical organisation. It is active now, and museums should not be pushing its agenda.

Ian Murray: I do not want to get into a debate about Extinction Rebellion or any other organisation, but I feel obliged to respond directly to that point. If my five-year-old daughter sees an exhibition on Extinction Rebellion and starts to talk about climate and other current political issues, I think that is what museums are there to do. They are not just there to celebrate heritage and the past; they are there to educate and inspire for the future. We do not have to agree with any of those

exhibitions. In fact, I have not particularly agreed with some of the exhibitions and creative curation I have seen, but I have still engaged with them to be able to have a political debate.

Dr Mullan: Members of Parliament and the public are also perfectly within their rights to say that they think they are a bad idea. It is a free speech issue, as much as anything. If a museum wants to put on an exhibition and then introduce all sorts of other political elements, the museum's members and politicians—all of us—are perfectly free to say that we think it is a bad idea and a bad use of time. What is wrong with that?

Ian Murray: It seems to me that some Opposition parties like to be bastions of freedom of speech until they disagree with what that freedom of speech is used to say.

Gregory Stafford: It is taxpayers' money.

Ian Murray: It is all taxpayers' money and public money, and it is the public's money as well. The public can decide whether they wish to attend these exhibitions. They can even ask their local museums to put on other curations. However, it is important to see that in the context of what our museums do. We might not agree with everything we see—in fact, we might agree with only a small proportion of all the stuff we see—but we should be exposed to it. That is what art and culture have been doing for centuries: expressing views. Looking at a painting is just about as politically expressive as seeing an exhibition about Extinction Rebellion.

I am conscious of time, so let me conclude by saying two more things. First, I will say a little about the vital role that museums play in schools and communities. For example, the Essex Fire Museum in Grays, in the Thurrock constituency, is a brilliant example of a museum partnering with schools in its local area to deliver practical, hands-on education that engages children in learning environments outside the classroom. The museum runs an impressive learning programme in schools, offering immersive experience of fire service history, as well as sessions designed to engage children with subjects such as home safety, cyber-safety and the environment.

Arts Council England's museums and schools programme, which is funded by DCMS, works with 18 museum partnerships across the country—from Blackburn to Scarborough to Bristol—providing money to connect museums with local schools. The programme reaches over 200,000 pupils across the country, which is key.

There is also placemaking and tourism, of course, as they are great drivers of footfall, and not just on our high streets but anywhere there is a museum. They drive footfall towards the areas where we want people to spend their money. Reviving our town centres is a key component of what the Government want to achieve. The average museum contributes nearly £350,000 to its local economy through visitor numbers alone.

The role of local museums, as the cultural heart of our communities, in protecting, exploring and sharing our diverse local stories is undeniable. Today we have heard examples of the immense and varied contributions that museums have made across the country. The Government will not neglect local museums. We have committed significant new funding to the sector—

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historically high funding—and forthcoming publications and policies, including our response to the Hodge review, will further our commitment to the museums sector right across the country. That will outline the breadth of our ambitions for the sector, now and into the future. I thank all hon. Members for championing their local museums.

2.55 pm

Jen Craft: I thank all Members who have taken part in today's debate. I appreciate their time, and I am sure that VisitBritain will contact us shortly about our commissions. We have had a brilliant whistle-stop tour of fabulous local museums around the country, from the Bayeux tapestry to the Dad's Army Museum, which I very much want to visit. I will make my own pitch for town of culture, and Thurrock has submitted several—we should obviously be a recipient because we have so much to offer, as I said in my opening remarks.

To my hon. Friends the Members for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson) and for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer), “fangs” for entering the Dracula debate. I will bat away any suggestions that Purfleet-on-Thames is not the epicentre of Dracula lore.

I will touch on a few things that have been mentioned. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said that local museums are an opportunity to learn from what history can teach, and perhaps not repeat the same mistakes. The Purfleet Heritage and Military Centre has an exhibit that lists the human toll and cost of war, which is incredibly timely with the discussions that are currently under way.

To my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner), I am friends with a very proud potter who has taken me to a number of the museums. I look forward to visiting the Gladstone Pottery Museum when I can. It is important to have a cultural exhibit that informs how modern techniques and practices deliver. My hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) spoke about how a museum can transform a town and about the power of arts and culture to drive a real sense of place.

I thank everyone for taking part in the debate, despite some of the fractious exchanges at the end. Local museums contextualise the people and history of a place, and they put it very firmly in the present and in our national story.

I once again thank the excellent volunteers at the Purfleet Heritage and Military Centre for the shift they have put in over the last few months to bring the museum up to where it is now. I again encourage everyone to get on the train and visit. It is only half an hour from London, and they will have an excellent time.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the contribution of local museums.

World Book Day

[WERA HOBHOUSE in the Chair]

[*Relevant documents: oral evidence taken before the Education Committee on 3 February, on Reading for Pleasure, HC 1528; and written evidence to the Education Committee, on Reading for Pleasure, reported to the House on 24 February, 10 February, 3 February, 27 January and 20 January, HC 1528.*]

3 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered World Book Day.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Hobhouse. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this debate. I am tempted to dedicate this debate to every parent or carer whose child has ever announced that they wanted to go to school for World Book Day as the Very Hungry Caterpillar, Flat Stanley or the tiger who came to tea; who has looked optimistically at their floor mop late at night, wondering whether it would pass as a Harry Potter broomstick; or who celebrated quietly when their child's costume of choice was a more modest “Where's Wally?” or Mr Bump.

It is important to be clear at the outset, however, that while dressing up for World Book Day is a source of great joy and excitement—sometimes accompanied by a degree of last-minute panic—for children and parents across the country, and for the commuters who get to appreciate the wonder and creativity of the costumes during the morning school run, that is not the core purpose of World Book Day. It is also important that any dressing up to mark World Book Day is done in an inclusive way, so that no child misses out on the opportunity to dress up because of a lack of resources or parental time.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I want to celebrate our local libraries and how much they give to our communities. Castle Donington library hosts not only a uniform swap but a dress-up swap, which is so important for affordability. Libraries are also working hard to tackle the literacy crisis that we face, as just one in three children aged eight to 18 say that they enjoy reading in their spare time. Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking libraries in North West Leicestershire, many of which are run by volunteers, for their dedication and the abundance of good that they give back to our communities, not just on World Book Day but week in, week out?

Helen Hayes: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. World Book Day is a collaboration between lots of different organisations across our communities, and libraries are central to that.

This year, we mark the 30th anniversary of World Book Day, which was first celebrated in 1996. Although it was founded by UNESCO, it was based on an idea from Pere Vicens, a prominent Spanish publisher from Barcelona and a former president of the International Publishers Association. He and his colleagues were reacting to the notion, common in the early 1990s, that books would be obsolete within 25 years. Their idea was

to promote the Spanish tradition of giving books and roses on St George's day, 23 April. That date did not work so well in the UK, as it regularly clashes with the Easter break, so we mark World Book Day on the first Thursday in March—today, in fact.

This year, World Book Day takes place during the Government's National Year of Reading, which is supported by the National Literacy Trust and other partners. I pay tribute to the parents, carers, teachers, support staff, early years practitioners, librarians, bookshops, authors, illustrators, publishers and others across the country who support and facilitate the celebration of World Book Day in numerous and ingenious ways.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): On that point, I invite my hon. Friend to pay tribute to my constituent Hayley Slack. She wrote the book "Little Coffee Cup", copies of which are printed entirely on recycled coffee cups. Does my hon. Friend agree that such an innovative approach to book writing and publishing encourages young people not only to read, but to think about sustainability?

Helen Hayes: That is a wonderfully creative way to engage children, not only in reading but in a wider and important area of learning.

I pay particular tribute to the schools and public libraries across my constituency of Dulwich and West Norwood; they are going above and beyond this week. I also pay tribute to the wealth of independent bookshops with which my constituency is particularly blessed, including the Paper Cat children's bookshop, where I recently had the privilege of meeting the Gruffalo in person, and to the brilliant Stepping into Stories children's literary festival, which goes from strength to strength each year.

The core purpose of World Book Day is to promote reading for fun. World Book Day is the UK's largest reading for pleasure campaign and is run by a charity of the same name. World Book Day is a delivery partner for the National Year of Reading. This year it is encouraging children to "Go All In" for World Book Day. The charity distributes 23.5 million £1 book tokens annually—sent to every UK primary school, plus secondary schools and nurseries on request—which children can exchange for a book from a selection chosen with the input of children and publishers.

World Book Day is enormously successful. In 2025, 91% of UK children aged five to eight took part in a World Book Day activity, and 93% of UK adults are aware of the event. A quarter of children on free school meals said that the first book they owned came as a result of the World Book Day £1 book tokens.

This is important because reading has such enormous benefits. A child who is read to at ages one to two scores more highly in reading, spelling, grammar and numeracy skills at ages eight to 11. Reading for pleasure at ages 10 to 16 has a substantial positive effect on vocabulary, spelling and maths performance by the age of 16. Children who are read to frequently at age five are over half a school year ahead in reading performance at age 15 compared with those who are read to infrequently or not at all.

For children growing up in poverty, being read to daily at age five is significantly associated with a greater chance of avoiding poverty in adulthood. The Education

Committee, which I Chair, has heard that reading for pleasure is a "driver of social mobility" and an "anti-poverty strategy".

Reading helps develop children's vocabulary. Studies have shown that the language used in books is more complex than spoken language, helping children learn more words and get used to more complex sentence structures. Reading has been shown to help develop empathy, especially towards stigmatised groups. Professor Jessie Ricketts, professor of psychology at Royal Holloway, University of London, said that reading allows children to learn about things outside of their own experiences. She said:

"When we pick up a book, there may be characters and environments that are not part of our lived experience. That is particularly important for people who are not moving around much and may not have access to those things."

Shared reading in the early years improves emotional closeness between child and caregiver. It lifts the parent's mood, increases warmth and reduces stress, enabling the sensitive and nurturing interactions that young children need to thrive.

Reading also helps children with their cognitive development. Reading with young children helps develop their attention and memory skills, and learning to read helps develop the area of the brain responsible for processing language. Evidence from neuroscience states:

"There is clear evidence that learning to read shapes the brain, resulting in the tuning of an area specialising in word processing".

Yet despite this huge range of benefits, the number of children reading for pleasure—choosing of their own volition to read when they have a choice about how to spend their time—is declining.

The National Literacy Trust's annual literacy survey 2025 found that the percentage of children and young people who enjoy reading is at its lowest in 20 years, with just one in three children and young people aged eight to 18 saying that they enjoy reading in their free time. That is a decrease of a third since 2005. Fewer than one in five children and young people aged eight to 18 read something daily in their free time in 2025. The decline is not evenly distributed across all demographics. Girls are significantly more likely to read for pleasure than boys. In 2025, 39% of girls aged eight to 18 said that they enjoy reading, compared with just 26% of boys.

Reading for pleasure also declines as children get older. Among children aged five to eight, 63% say that they enjoy reading, declining to 47% of eight to 11-year-olds, 30% of 11 to 14-year-olds and 29% of 14 to 16-year-olds. The situation in England is substantially worse than internationally, with the most recent progress in international reading literacy study in 2021 finding that 29% of English pupils said they "very much like" reading, compared with the international average of 42%.

Children's reading patterns are not established in a vacuum. It is striking that a recent BookTrust survey found that 70% of parents and carers said they face challenges in sharing books with their child. That rises significantly to 75% for those parents on low incomes.

It is in that context that the Education Committee is undertaking an inquiry on reading for pleasure. We are exploring why there has been a generational shift in reading for pleasure and what can be done to reverse the trend. We are looking across the sector to assess the role of schools, early years settings, libraries, parents, authors,

[Helen Hayes]

publishers and more, and we are looking at the different groups of children and families who are least likely to read for pleasure and how they can be supported to read more.

So far, the inquiry has received around 180 pieces of written evidence and has held two oral evidence sessions during which we have heard from academics, charities and experts. I would like to put on record my thanks to children and their teachers from Mulberry Canon Barnett primary school, who came into Parliament today to talk to the Committee about their experiences of reading.

The evidence we have received cites a number of possible reasons for the decline in reading for pleasure. Barriers to children's reading for pleasure include an increase in recreational screen use. Onyinye Iwu, a children's author and secondary school art teacher, said that her pupils told her,

"we have TikTok. What's the point?"

As she continued,

"You've got TikTok, you've got Netflix, you've got the film coming out, so why would you read the book?"

We also heard that the focus on reading proficiency and an overcrowded curriculum can mean that reading for pleasure is seen as a "nice to have", crowded out of the everyday practice of some schools. A Department for Education survey found that 21% of parents of secondary-aged pupils and 14% of parents of primary-aged pupils said their children were too busy with homework to find time for reading.

We have heard that cuts to library services and school libraries have limited access to books. Local authority spending on public libraries decreased from £1.5 billion in 2009-10 to £673 million in 2022-23, followed by a slight increase the following year. The Great School Libraries campaign found that there were 10% fewer libraries in secondary schools between 2019 and 2022, and that 15% of secondary schools had a library but no budget at all for it. I warmly welcome the Government's commitment to ensure that every primary school has a school library by the end of this Parliament and to provide funding for secondary school libraries.

The lack of a quiet reading environment due to overcrowded housing and reduced community provision is also making a difference to the reading habits of children from the lowest income backgrounds. The evidence also points to a decline in reading among adults, leading to less shared reading with children and less role-modelling of reading by adults. The Reading Agency found that only 53% of UK adults now read regularly for pleasure, compared with 58% in 2015. Children are more than twice as likely to report seeing parents relax by watching TV than by reading. Luke Taylor, senior researcher at the Centre for Social Justice, told the Committee that it is particularly important for boys to see men reading, and highlighted a lack of male role models as a factor in the lower levels of reading among boys.

It is also important that children can find themselves in books. Children from minoritised communities are particularly likely to say that they do not see themselves in what they read. Only 24% of children's books published in 2024 featured a racially minoritised character. Onyinye Iwu said that although there was a boom in ethnically diverse books in 2020, it has not been sustained.

The Committee also reviewed evidence on what works to get children reading. We have heard that connecting reading to children's interests is important. The National Literacy Trust survey found that two in five children and young people were motivated to read when material related to a favourite film or TV series, or matched their interests or hobbies. Debbie Hicks, creative director at the Reading Agency, told the Committee that tying reading in with interests such as sports, music or science, technology, engineering and maths can offer

"really familiar entry points for reluctant readers."

Our witnesses spoke of the need for "mirrors and windows" to ensure that children are represented in books while also being exposed to different cultures and experiences. Onyinye Iwu said that there has been a "big jump forward" in the availability of books with diverse characters and stories, but a much narrower range of authors is still being regularly highlighted and promoted in shops and in the curriculum. Witnesses spoke of the need for children to have genuine "choice and agency" over what they read. The National Literacy Trust survey found that a quarter of children said that being free to choose what they wanted to read was a motivating factor.

The Committee has heard that children with special educational needs and disabilities, especially those with dyslexia, can struggle to access traditional texts. Ellen Broomé, the chief executive officer of the British Dyslexia Association, said that dyslexic children can find reading "difficult, exhausting and something they avoid"

and that they can have

"feelings of failure and embarrassment and stigma around their reading."

The evidence that we have received has emphasised the importance of accessible texts for children with SEND and ensuring that read-for-pleasure initiatives are inclusive.

We have also heard that seeing reading as a social activity is a motivating factor for children. Children are motivated to read by social factors such as having opportunities to discuss books with their peers or—as we heard from children at Mulberry Canon Barnett primary school this morning—to act out the story in class or have the opportunity to continue or finish the story themselves. Professor Jessie Ricketts highlighted the special importance of social factors for teenagers, as they are

"very much guided by what their peers think"

and often do not see reading as a social activity.

There is much to be learned from World Book Day for the encouragement of reading for pleasure all year round. Professor Teresa Cremin told the Committee that teachers should aim to

"spread World Book Day practice...throughout the year"

by supporting children to read in their own time and to develop the habit of reading. She said:

"If you had a rich reading pedagogy in your classroom, every day is World Book Day. Every day I am trying to support you 32 as readers. It is my job...not an occasional piece".

Jonathan Douglas, chief executive of the National Literacy Trust, and Annie Crombie, co-chief executive of BookTrust, told the Committee that events such as World Book Day have "immense value" in creating a buzz of excitement around reading and making partners on the ground feel that they are part of something bigger. However, they highlighted the need for that to be built on a wider infrastructure of reading activity throughout the year.

The Education Committee will make our recommendations to the Government later this year. The benefits of reading for pleasure for children and adults are enormous; they speak directly to some of the most significant challenges that children and young people face around mental health and wellbeing and the impacts of screen time and social media. Reversing the decline must therefore be an urgent priority.

I will end by once again thanking everyone who is involved in supporting this year's World Book Day and the National Year of Reading. Whether they are marking World Book Day by dressing up as their favourite character or simply curling up in a corner with a good book, I hope they enjoy the day.

3.17 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for setting the scene incredibly well. It is a real pleasure to have her back in a very constructive role; I thank her for her work on the Education Committee. Her speech today demonstrates her energy and her deep interest in the subject. I am also pleased to see the Minister back in her place. We were both here at 3 o'clock last week—we meet again!

Books are wonderful. As an avid book lover, I read many books. For thrills at the office, I read Andy McNab or Chris Ryan's books about the SAS or thrillers about MI5, MI6, wars and so on; I am almost 71, but maybe at heart I am still a boy of 16. I love those books, but I read many others as well, and there are many that interest me.

The girls in my office know that at the end of a working day, I always take 15 or 20 minutes to read another couple of chapters of a book that is completely different. It is the true story of a young boy who left Afghanistan. His dad was killed in the Afghanistan war. His mum saved up to send him across the world, not as a trafficked person but as a refugee, and ultimately he ended up in the United Kingdom. That is what I am reading: the story of a young boy's troubles. I am only a third of the way through, but every week I take a few minutes to read the story of that wee boy, who is a young man now.

Two young girls who work in my office are perhaps—can I say this?—unhealthily obsessed with reading all types of books, notably ones that I would have zero interest in. They swap books with each other—something I have enjoyed doing for many years. They were talking recently about the fact that many fantastic books are now made into films, such as "Wuthering Heights". I presume they were referring to the new one—I nearly fear to look at it, but that is by the way. Their words were, "It was a good film, but it wasn't as good as the book." That is perhaps the opposite of what the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood said. Films do not always fully illustrate the content or the interest of a book. A good novel—a real good read—very much resonates with people.

I believe that more must be done to make the shift away from screens and to get more young people into books. That is why celebrating World Book Day is so important. I submitted an early-day motion on that just last week because I recognise that importance. I have five grandchildren. Two of them are really wee small ones—one is five and one is three. They are staying at

our house at the minute while my son builds his house on the farm. They have an insatiable hunger for books. The wee girl came home from a weekend away with her other granny with about 12 books—they have to go with her everywhere. That encourages me.

Surveys have shown that a significant minority of schools in Northern Ireland lack dedicated library spaces. It is really important to have a library in every school. The schools that do not rely instead on classroom shelving, rather than formal library accommodation. There is work to be done. That is not the Minister's responsibility, because education is devolved in Northern Ireland, but it is something that we need to do, as the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood said in her introduction. Many things happening here on the mainland also happen back home.

In Northern Ireland, nearly 25% of primary school pupils reached the advanced benchmark, showing very high literacy skills. Very few pupils scored at the lowest international reading level. For secondary school reading, in the programme for international student assessment 2022, Northern Ireland's 15-year-olds performed above the OECD average in reading literacy, showing strong comprehension and analytical skills. There is great achievement in Northern Ireland. As the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood said when she talked about her Select Committee's report, there is much to do here. We may be slightly ahead in literacy and reading skills, but that does not mean that we should sit on our laurels. We have to strive to do better. However, these are promising statistics with scope for improvement.

The hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) was right to say in her intervention that libraries do incredible work. I want to put on record my thanks to the library in Newtownards in my constituency for all it does and the service it provides to the public. Libraries do not just lend thousands upon thousands of books every week that then come back in again—whenever I call the library, it is always busy with people coming and going—they do other things as well. Elderly people come to read a magazine or a book, do a bit of knitting or just have a little natter or wee chat. Libraries are an important focal point for people, and the library in Newtownards is that for my people. It is a fantastic initiative, as books and Kindles can be so expensive. They are some people's choice, but not everybody's.

To conclude—I am ever conscious that others need a chance to speak as well—World Book Day reminds us that books are more than words on a page. They are doors to new worlds, new ideas and new possibilities. It would not be an exaggeration to say that they are where the new adventure begins. Let's keep turning the pages, sharing the stories and celebrating the incredible magic of reading every day of our lives.

3.24 pm

Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): May I say what an incredible pleasure it is to serve under your superb chairship, Mrs Hobhouse? I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for securing this debate.

As in so many other ways, I am proud to represent an area that truly punches above its weight in literary tradition, not only through the talent the Isle of Wight has produced past and present, but through the inspiration

[Richard Quigley]

the island has offered to many of our country's most celebrated authors. Just two weeks ago, I was honoured to attend the Isle of Wight story festival, a wonderful event supported by the national lottery and Arts Council England created for island families during the February half term. The festival showcases not only the passion for creativity and storytelling across all ages on the island, but its founding principle that stories are around us, wherever you live, whoever you are and whatever your circumstance. It is a precious reminder that imagination and creativity exist in all of us, even people in this place.

I touched only briefly on the island's rich literary tradition earlier, so I hope Members will indulge me as I offer a small humblebrag about the remarkable authors and the stories that have been produced on or inspired by the Isle of Wight.

Charles Dickens spent several months on the island while working on his semi-autobiographical novel "David Copperfield". During a visit to Bonchurch, he described it as

"quite the prettiest place I have seen".

Despite not being in my constituency, I agree. Today, the island proudly commemorates his 1849 family holiday through the Charles Dickens trail, which guides visitors around the locations he knew and loved.

The Isle of Wight was also home to Queen Victoria's beloved poet laureate, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, who lived at Farringford House in Freshwater. Although he ultimately felt compelled to leave due to the rather overenthusiastic attention of local residents and curious tourists, he maintained ownership of Farringford House until his death. Upon his elevation to the House of Lords in 1844, he took the title Baron Tennyson of Aldworth and Freshwater, suggesting he did not harbour too much ill will towards the island, despite the disruptions he endured during his time there.

However, the island is so much more than its literary past. I think of the Isle of Wight literary festival, which has not only hosted such authors as Dr Stuart Lawrence, Susie Dent and Martin Edwards, but also does fantastic outreach through its schools programme, which brings these celebrated authors into almost every local primary classroom, allowing local children to see these stories and the authors behind them in real life.

While I am pleased to celebrate the island's rich literary heritage, it would be remiss of me not to highlight that, despite the inspiration that the island has provided to some of our greatest writers, we remain one of the UK's most disadvantaged areas for literacy and have the second-highest level of educational deprivation in the south. One in three children leaves school unable to read at the expected level. Without straying too far from the subject of today's debate, the contrast speaks to why the island is so often left behind in terms of funding and outcomes.

Our historic reputation and perception as a holiday destination for the wealthy masks the reality experienced by most islanders, particularly our children. Too often, these outdated assumptions rather than the stark realities I have set out influence funding allocations. When I have spoken to officials inside Government, there has been genuine shock to learn that relative child poverty on the island is 10% higher than the regional average

and nearly 3% higher than the national average. That goes a long way to explaining the gap between the perception of the island and the reality.

Despite these obstacles, I know there is a strong determination, nationally from the Education Secretary to the brilliant education team in the Isle of Wight council, to improve that picture. I am absolutely certain that the talent and determination is there to ensure that our literary tradition is matched by equally strong outcomes from young readers and students.

As we celebrate World Book Day, I end with a nod to author and admirer of our island, Jane Austen. In the novel "Mansfield Park", Maria and Julia tease their cousin Fanny for her devotion, saying:

"She thinks of nothing but the Isle of Wight, and she calls it the Island, as if there were no other island in the world."

As any Austen reader knows, it is Fanny and perhaps the Isle of Wight itself that has the last laugh, proving in time to have a depth of understanding and awareness that her cousins never quite match.

3.28 pm

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for schools, learning and assessment, and the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on social mobility. This debate was opened so passionately by my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), Chair of the Education Committee, who rightly reminds us of the role of parents in World Book Day, scurrying around and supporting their young people to dress up in fantastic costumes. One of my happiest memories of World Book Day is of when I was a teacher and put together a fantastic costume of the Cyclops from Homer's "Odyssey"—I do not think the pictures are still online, so do not try to look for them.

Reading is one of life's joys. It is a bridge to new worlds, to new opportunities and to new ideas. One of my proudest and happiest moments so far as Bracknell's MP was having the honour to open a new school library at Fox Hill primary in my constituency. Seeing the excitement from so many young readers who could not wait to make use of the new renovated space warmed my heart. So too did visiting Uplands school in Sandhurst alongside the Education Secretary last year, and speaking to students there about the books they were reading and why they had chosen them.

I take this opportunity to officially wish everyone here, in Bracknell Forest and across the country a happy World Book Day, and a happy National Year of Reading. The Government are marking the event with a commitment to ensure that every primary school in England has a library by the end of this Parliament.

Reading has proven benefits for attainment. It has been linked to stronger writing skills, improved brain development and even higher future earnings, but it is not just academically that it benefits young people. It also has a demonstrable impact on wellbeing, including on confidence, empathy and emotional intelligence. Given the challenges facing young people in our modern world, these are the skills we need to help them develop.

As the Chair of the Education Committee said, we are conducting an inquiry into reading for pleasure. We have heard evidence about the wide range of benefits of

reading for young people, and that reading for pleasure—reading what we want to read, because we want to read it—has particular advantages. We have also heard alarming evidence that there has been a 36% decrease in the number of children between eight and 18 who are reading for pleasure since 2005. Only a third of children are now picking up a book and enjoying doing so. We are seeing that decline in two particular groups—those with special educational needs and boys.

There are obvious barriers to reading for many SEND learners, particularly those with dyslexia, but that does not mean that they should not be afforded the same opportunities as their classmates to access the benefits and joys of books, or that they do not stand to benefit from reading just as much as their peers. There are many ways to access the world of reading, from traditional physical books to audiobooks, graphic novels, newspapers and e-readers, and it is not just format where inclusion matters. What international evidence exists suggests that the systemic use of age-appropriate, culturally inclusive children's literature, coupled with an engaging reading experience, can help build positive reading habits and enhance comprehension for SEND learners. For that reason, it is so important that we support and empower schools to create inclusive cultures around reading.

The British Dyslexia Association, a fantastic organisation that just so happens to be based in my constituency, has stressed that there are concrete measures that schools can take and Government can promote that would make a real difference. Those include funding widely stocked and accessible school libraries, providing training and technology to support staff, and early intervention to identify reading difficulties as soon as possible.

According to the National Literacy Trust, reading rates are lower for boys than for girls at every age, and fewer than one in 10 boys aged 14 to 16 read for daily pleasure. That is an important point. Reading is important for attainment but, as I have said, it is already a joy, and it should be encouraged not purely for academic purposes but simply for fun. It is especially interesting that the NTL's research shows that reading for pleasure dips for both girls and boys in early adolescence, but recovers for girls while remaining persistently low for boys. That drives the widening gender gap on reading for pleasure in the teenage years, so why do young men not pick up books again while their female classmates do? We do not have all the answers to that, but we need to find them.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentions that reading is so important for children's development and enjoyment. None of that is possible without the work of incredible children's authors. Beckenham and Penge was home to Enid Blyton, with over 700 books including the Famous Five series, and Walter de la Mare, with his incredible series of children's ghost stories. Today, we are home to some fantastic children's authors, including Penny Chrimes and Peter Bently. Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking every children's author, past and present, for their incredible contributions?

Peter Swallow: Absolutely. As we heard, the range of children's books is growing. It can be slightly reductive to suggest that a single type of book appeals to a single kind of child, so we need to see a broad range of books. We need non-fiction as well as fiction, because lots of young people love to get into reading by picking up a

non-fiction book. Whatever we can do, with the help of children's authors, to encourage young people to find the thing that gets them reading and gets them hooked so that they carry on reading, including a broader range of works, is important.

This is a world where boys and young men are facing unique pressures. They are increasingly vulnerable to turning away from the world and towards the misogyny and hatred they too often encounter online. Hon. Members in the Chamber may have heard me speak many times about the importance of skills in our education system, but it strikes me that this debate concerns the most essential skill of all, which goes to the heart of how we equip our boys to become healthy and happy young men in today's world—not reading per se, as important as that is, but empathy. Ultimately, whatever the genre or type of book, reading is about seeing the world from a new perspective and a point of view that is different from our own. That is why it speaks to our common humanity.

As we come together as a nation this year to celebrate our shared love of reading and our mutual responsibility to foster that in the younger generation, we must ensure that that effort is inclusive and inspiring. That is perhaps the biggest challenge, but it also holds the greatest rewards. If we can take reading for pleasure as our starting point, not our ending point, everything else will follow.

I will finish by sharing the book that I am reading at the moment, which is "Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead" by Olga Tokarczuk. I am reading it with my book club. I thought I would finish with that, purely to point out that no one is ever too old or too young to pick up a good book.

3.36 pm

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for securing the debate, and for her excellent contribution that set the scene for our discussion.

I am sure we all remember what triggered our own love of reading—a particular book or story, or perhaps a movie or play that inspired us to read the book upon which it was based. For me, it was the birthday gift of two books from my grandfather when I was six. They were "Heidi" by Johanna Spyri and a follow-up called "Heidi's Children" by Charles Tritten. I admit that it was the illustrations in "Heidi's Children" that first attracted me, because they were so beautiful, but I was soon drawn into the story of the orphaned Heidi as she made her home in the Alps with her elderly grandfather. Reading has been important to me ever since. It is something I do every day—and I am not talking about emails.

This year I decided to organise a competition among the primary schools in my constituency of Glasgow West to mark World Book Day. I thank Liam, the librarian at Drumchapel library who judged the competition. On World Book Day, I thank him and all the librarians across Glasgow West for the work they do throughout the year. I also thank all the schools that took part in the competition and, of course, the winners: Mac Wallace of Scotstoun primary, Yahia of Hyndland primary and Robert Kwiatkowski of Knightswood primary, and the overall winner, Martha Cavanagh of Notre Dame primary school.

[Patricia Ferguson]

All entrants were asked to write about their favourite book, and Martha chose “Anne of Green Gables” by L.M. Montgomery. Martha explained that she enjoyed that book, and highlighted its “heartwarming touch of funniness” as one of the reasons for her choice. As Martha rightly says, books can be funny and make us laugh, they can be thought-provoking and they can help us learn. They can also take us to places we might never visit and open our minds to new ideas. We owe the National Literacy Trust a debt of gratitude for consistently promoting World Book Day on an annual basis over the years.

I want to mention another initiative that I had the pleasure of being a very small part of last year. That is the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, which operated, among other places, from Drumchapel library, which I mentioned earlier. That initiative provides young people with one free, high-quality, age-appropriate book per month, from birth until the age of five. So far, it has distributed more than 7 million books in the UK.

When researching for this debate, I noticed an interesting poll from *More in Common*—maybe I pay too much attention to polls in my reading. That poll suggested that Conservatives and Reform have more in common than just the revolving doors of Tories defecting to Reform. It would seem that supporters of both parties identified “Paddington” as their favourite children’s book. “Paddington” is a terrific book, as we all know, but I think it is a wee bit ironic that it tells the story of a displaced bear who comes to the UK from his home in Peru due to a change in family circumstances.

To be more serious for a moment, we know how unstable the world currently is and how vulnerable children are in so many countries. Their opportunity to learn and to benefit from education is greatly diminished, and their access to books, which could make such a difference to their lives, is often non-existent. Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown has long called for education to be safeguarded in times of conflict; perhaps we could agree to add access to books to his call.

3.40 pm

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I want to put it on the record that Paddington is my favourite bear, and I have a large poster of Paddington in Westminster in my office, so I do not want people to get the wrong end of the stick and think he is only liked by certain other parties.

In the early years of the 20th century, a young girl was growing up in a Georgian house at the end of the high street in Leighton Buzzard. As a child, she would often wonder why things went missing or were not exactly where she remembered leaving them: a stamp that had disappeared, a safety pin that turned up somewhere entirely unexpected, or maybe a missing potato. She imagined that tiny people were living quietly in the corners of her home, borrowing things. She was Mary Norton, who became the author of the world-famous book “The Borrowers”, putting Leighton Buzzard on the map for readers forever.

Today, the house that Mary Norton grew up in is part of Leighton middle school, which I had the pleasure of visiting recently, where I met enthusiastic, curious and

thoughtful pupils. I love going to schools across my constituency—it is one of my favourite things to do. In Lime Tree academy in Houghton Regis I recently met Fatima, who told me that she had read every single book in the school library. Sadly, not all her peers are such strong readers.

Less than half of white working-class pupils in central Bedfordshire reach the expected standard of reading in year 6—that is the lowest figure in the entire country. Can the Minister tell me what bespoke help is available for schools that have been let down for decades by Tory Governments and the council’s local education authority? I know from visiting classrooms that the teachers are just as dedicated and the children are just as eager to learn as elsewhere in the country. There are systemic problems that need to be sorted out, including the three-tier system that we have.

I welcome the new National Year of Reading. I note that it is the third: there was one in 1998, one in 2008 and now one in 2026. Those years are linked, I think, by the fact that we had Labour Governments in all of them. The campaign asks families across the country to read together for just 10 minutes a day.

As has been noted before, there are fantastic places to read, including local libraries. Over the summer I went to Dunstable library, which is a fantastic facility. I met a young girl there who was reading all about Arrietty, star of “The Borrowers”. My constituency also has brilliant bookshops, including Book Leighton Buzzard, an independent bookshop that is bringing authors into classrooms throughout 2026 as part of the Year of Reading.

One thing that I do rather a lot is turn to a little part of a book that people may not always read—the bit that says where it is printed. I have a reason for that, which some hon. Members may know about. In my constituency there is a facility run by Amazon, which prints books on demand. When I went there for the first time I found it a fascinating place, because they print lots of individual books. It looks like a shelf, a bookshop or a library, because all those books are different shapes, sizes and colours.

I flicked through a book at the facility and it said in it, “Printed by Amazon in the UK.” I thought, “That’s not good enough, is it? I want people to know exactly where in the UK it was printed.” I asked the bosses whether they would change it, and I think they thought I was being a bit daft about the topic. I thought, “Well, I am going to keep on asking about this,” but I kept on being ignored for a little while.

Then I stumbled upon an idea. I thought, “I know—I am going to write my own book: a little children’s book about a book with an identity crisis, who goes all around the country trying to find out where he was printed.” He goes all the way to the west of England to see if he was born—printed—there, and he goes all the way up to Scotland. He goes to Liverpool and finds out about the Beatles, but does not think he was published there. Finally, the local MP intervenes, and thankfully, the book finds out that he is actually from Dunstable.

I sent the book to the Amazon bosses to be printed, and said, “All the best stories have happy endings, so please make my story have a happy ending too,” and they did that for me. Now every single book printed on demand by Amazon proudly says, “Printed in Dunstable” on it.

The self-publishing industry is really changing: the number of self-published books now exceeds the number of traditionally published ones. My office manager has penned one called “Ash”, a thriller set in Iceland, and I have a friend called Stephen Rogers who wrote about a nuclear disaster in the Bristol channel. In Dunstable, publishing has truly been democratised. More than a million books have now flown off the printing press there, all proudly saying, “Printed in Dunstable”, which has put the town on the map and is a phrase that I will always enjoy reading.

3.45 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse, and to respond on behalf of my party to this debate on World Book Day. I commend the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for her excellent opening speech and for securing the debate.

World Book Day gives us a wonderful opportunity to discuss the power of reading, and we have heard some wonderful contributions about favourite books, much-loved authors and the transformative effect of a special book. Arguably the most important of Labour’s five missions for Government is breaking down barriers to opportunity for disadvantaged children, improving social mobility and seeking to lift children out of poverty. An incredibly powerful and often overlooked way of progressing towards those goals is by ensuring that more children are reading for pleasure, especially in their early years. Research shows that young children whose parents read just one book a day to them will hear about 290,000 more words by age five than those who do not regularly read books with a parent. Consistent, early exposure to books, rather than just infrequent reading, is crucial for closing a vocabulary gap that can stunt a child’s prospects all the way through school.

I hope that the Government’s support of family hubs will include a focus on educating parents about the importance of early reading, because it is crucial that all new parents are aware of the powerful, transformational difference that it can make to their children’s life chances. The Chair of the Education Committee, the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood, spoke passionately about the enormous value of shared reading between parents and very young children.

Patricia Ferguson: I draw the hon. Member’s attention to a scheme that has been running in Scotland since about 2000. It used to be called “Bookstart” and is now called “Bookbug”. New-born babies through to children at the beginning of primary school go along to the library with their parent or carer and take part in communal reading, singing and action. It is an amazing experience to see, and a wonderful way of getting those children hooked on reading and communicating about it with other children.

Caroline Voaden: Communal groups where children can read together and parents can be encouraged can really boost a parent’s confidence in their ability to share a book with their child, because some parents do not feel as confident reading as others do.

Last Friday night, I had the pleasure of reading “The Gruffalo” to my 18-month-old grandson. It was the first time that I have sat and read him a bedtime story,

so I am starting again that long journey of reading to children, which ended with my eldest daughter after the fifth “Harry Potter” book, at which point I said, “No more,” and that she would have to read the last two on her own.

Peter Swallow: The hon. Lady provokes me to add a huge thank you to all the grandparents, kinship carers and extended family who support parents in reading to their children. In my family, it is often my dad who reads to my nieces and who they run to for a book at bedtime, so I say a huge thank you to the surrounding family who support our young people to love reading.

Caroline Voaden: The hon. Member is absolutely right. When I was a rather frazzled single parent of two young children, I remember that my mum would sit calmly and quietly with the girls and read them stories when I did not have the headspace. It was a lovely thing to see, and they developed a very special bond.

This week, we on the Education Committee have heard some powerful evidence from experts on reading. Reading to children exposes them to millions of words that differ substantially from everyday spoken language, as books contain a wider range of vocabulary, more complex sentence structures and richer narrative forms. Reading helps children to develop their own vocabulary that they can go on to use during their school years and beyond. Dr Jo Taylor, associate professor of language and cognition at University College London, explained to us how exposure to language leads to vocabulary development.

There is also clear evidence that reading improves cognitive development, tuning an area of the brain that specialises in word processing. Several studies show that, alongside those developmental benefits, young people who develop the habit of reading in early childhood are likely to achieve higher qualifications and better upward social mobility later in life. An evidence review by BookTrust found that shared reading is consistently associated with stronger academic performance. By age 16, reading for pleasure is a much stronger predictor of progress in vocabulary, mathematics and spelling than parental educational attainment. Compared with their peers, disadvantaged children who achieve highly at the end of primary school are twice as likely to have been read to at home in their early years. Reading is such an important thing to do with young children.

That evidence shows how vital it is for improving social mobility that we strongly encourage and educate parents to read to their children regularly, throughout the early years, and that we continue to push children to keep reading for pleasure throughout their childhood and into their adult lives. No opportunity is better than World Book Day to demonstrate to children the simple joy of reading. World Book Day is a wonderful reminder of the difference that reading can make in a child’s life, not just in the classroom but far beyond it. I commend the hon. Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) for her competition. I love the fact that she knows someone called Liam the librarian—he sounds like a character from a children’s book.

Dressing up as a favourite book character is great fun for children. It is a fantastic way for them to bring their fantasies to life and to live, if only for a moment, the life of their favourite character. It is perhaps less enjoyed by

[Caroline Voaden]

the frazzled parents, and I think that World Book Day has the potential to become a bit of a competition about who has the best fancy dress costume, so I welcome the alternative approaches taken by some schools to avoid that, and welcome costume lending libraries. I clearly remember the horror of, the day before World Book Day, remembering that a costume was needed.

I am very proud to say that my younger daughter is now a professional costume maker in film, trained at a very early age by her disappointment in her mother's attempts. She would begin deliberating about her World Book Day costume weeks before the event. Although I am biased, I have to say that her costume of Effie Trinket, from "The Hunger Games", was quite phenomenal. So, for all those parents who did not manage it this year there could be an upside.

Beyond the fancy dress, it is important that we remember what World Book Day is really about: reading. That is especially so this year, the National Year of Reading. The current state of children's reading in this country is deeply concerning. We heard a lot of evidence about that in today's debate. Reading rates are plummeting: the National Literacy Trust's annual literacy survey found that in 2025 the percentage of children and young people who said that they enjoy reading was at its lowest level in 20 years. Just under a third of children aged eight to 18 said that they enjoyed reading in their free time last year—that is a shocking decrease of 36% over the last 20 years—and less than a fifth of eight to 18-year-olds said that they read something daily in their free time last year.

As hon. Members have discussed, there is a noticeable gendered aspect to the decline in the love for reading. Some 39.8% of girls aged eight to 18 said that they enjoy reading, compared with just a quarter of boys. That gap has expanded massively in recent years. It is also important to note that in 2020, research by the National Literacy Trust found that children and young people from minority ethnic groups, particularly those from black ethnic backgrounds, reported that they did not see themselves in what they read. It is far harder for children from such groups to find pleasure in reading when they struggle to find a book that they can relate to, or feel a cultural connection with. This week in the Education Committee we heard that that might have as much to do with the marketing of books, and with the industry, as with anything else.

How do we address the concerning trend of reading rates that continue to fall? As we have heard, libraries are a good place to start. The importance of a child having the opportunity to choose any book they like and take it home for free cannot be overestimated, especially for those who cannot afford to buy new books. Access to books is a key issue for disadvantaged children. The National Literacy Trust's research found that one in 10 children and young people reported having no books of their own at home, rising to one in six for those who receive free school meals. That is why the Liberal Democrats would fund additional library opening hours as part of our commitment to hobby hubs—community third spaces where people can gather and enjoy hobbies, including reading. We would encourage children to utilise these spaces, providing access and opportunity for them to read more.

It is a sad fact that Libraries Unlimited in Devon has just had to declare that it can no longer sustain the opening hours of our much-loved libraries as they are, due to the chronic and sustained underfunding of local authorities like Devon county council over the past decade or so. I am pleased that my Liberal Democrat colleagues in Devon have just committed an extra £1 million to help libraries transition to a more sustainable footing, although that will have to rely on volunteers as well as paid staff—and it should not have to be that way.

I am really encouraged by the extraordinary response to my colleagues' consultation, showing just how important libraries are to the people of Devon, who are clearly readers. We have an astounding array of bookshops in my constituency, and I commend everyone in the East Gate Bookshop, Castle Books, Oxfam Bookshop, the Harbour Bookshop, Another Chapter, Browser Books and Dartmouth Community Bookshop—I hope I have not forgotten any.

Additionally, like public libraries, libraries in schools need proper resourcing, and school librarians need training to encourage children to find books that will light a spark for them. Reading for pleasure means that children need to find something that they genuinely enjoy reading, so on this World Book Day I welcome the Government's ambition to have a library in every primary school by the end of the Parliament. I hope the Minister can set out how the Government will invest specifically in school libraries, including all those that already exist, to ensure that children have access to books and support with fostering a love for reading, especially children with SEND, who may find reading more of a challenge but can still enjoy it.

When trying to explain the recent decline in reading rates, we cannot ignore the recent increase in recreational screen use. Children are being engrossed by addictive algorithms, swiping through TikTok rather than investing time and attention in a book. That is why the Government's campaign to increase the number of children reading for pleasure must be accompanied by stronger measures to crack down on addictive social media platforms and children using phones in schools. That should start with legislating to introduce film-style age ratings for social media platforms that use addictive algorithms, as proposed by the Liberal Democrats, and legislating to ban smartphones from all school premises.

Alex Mayer: I recently ran a survey in a local school and asked the children what they thought they would be doing if they were not spending as much time on smartphones. About a third of them said they thought they would be reading more if they were on social media less, so I am really pleased that the Government are running a consultation and are about to take serious action.

Caroline Voaden: The hon. Member's contribution illustrates the draw of the smartphone, which is pulling children away from books—and it is not just children. I am sure many of us in this room are guilty of being addicted to the algorithm late at night, rather than going to bed early and reading a book.

Finally, we need to pay more attention to the curriculum and how we teach English, especially in secondary school. For many, English has become a box-ticking exercise where students are taught to answer exam

questions on specific books, rather than being given the space to foster a love of reading. We need children to read for pleasure, rather than being forced to trawl through the same books repeatedly in order to answer set questions for their GCSEs. It is no coincidence that rates of reading decline with age. Over twice as many children aged five to eight said they read something in their free time daily compared with those aged 11 to 14.

We need space in our curriculum, especially in secondary schools, for reading for pleasure, which is why the Liberal Democrats are committed to a broader curriculum that makes genuine space for the arts and humanities and expands extracurricular enrichment, especially for disadvantaged children. That should include reading for pleasure. The Liberal Democrats believe that every child deserves an education rooted in curiosity, creativity and critical thinking. Reading sits at the heart of all of that—it opens doors, builds empathy and gives children the tools they need to thrive.

Every child deserves the chance to find a book that changes their life, so let us celebrate World Book Day and all the other initiatives designed to get children and adults reading for pleasure. The opportunities, ideas, dreams and passions it can unlock are endless.

3.59 pm

Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con): It's a pleasure to serve 'neath your chair'ship today,

And I hope you'll forgive if today—just today—

I do not speak

In the usual way.

For today—yes, today!—is World Book Day, they say.

A day made for books and bright words at their play.

I thank my Honourable Friend with a cheer and a grin,

The Member for Dulwich and West Norwood—who let the debate on reading begin!

And today—yes, today!—on this most Bookish of days,

I won't stick to the script in much-loved Erskine May.

No dry phrases today in the proper array—

I'll try it instead in a Seussian way!

So today—yes, today!—we can happily spend

Time on good stories from beginning to end.

With a flip and a flourish, a swish and a sway,

For books are the best thing to brighten the day!

Here comes a test for my rhyming wordplay

For a brief jot in time while I quickly relay

The wisdom and pearls of Honourable Friends here today

I've made up on the spot in the Seussian way.

If it's "Reading for fun and going all in",

Grab that book off the shelf—take your mind off for a spin.

Each little child with a token and smile

Turns books into grammar, spelling and maths improved style.

From Strangford, we heard about Andy McNab

His strong love for reading shows in his gift of the gab

We thank all the libraries that open their doors

Not just to the building but lands on strange shores.

Like Isle of Wight West where Dickens and Tennyson called home

But not, to my knowledge, did Jerome K Jerome.

From Bracknell we heard about Fox Hill primary's new library,

Something we want in every secondary and primary.

Glasgow West told of how Heidi inspired

As well as how books during conflict required

Too many speeches—I can't do them all

But all of them wonderful in Westminster Hall.

I'm not quite yet done with my Dr-Seuss speech

There's more—yes, some more—'fore the exits you reach.

For I haven't yet shared my own greatest tale

Of two little boys from near Sunningdale.

A hop and a skip to the next village along

Are two little boys who love books, deep and strong.

The older loves space, rockets and sky

The littler one dinosaurs

who roar as they fly.

By accident or luck did it happen? It did not!

For many things quickly take the top spot!

Grown-ups are tired and they work all day through

So easy it is to forget what is true.

But the truth is that after another long day,

The thing I love most when I'm tired is say,

"Sit on my lap, boys. Rest your sleepy heads down,"

For a tale before bed will melt any frown.

It needn't be complex or long as a Tolkien,

A Tolstoy or Dickens, James Joyce, and be hulking;

Few words here and there—what a difference they make

To children's vocabularies and the brain cells they shake.

For Maths chaps like me who like numbers, not words

Books we still need for fractions like thirds

Whether green eggs and ham or bears from Peru,

Scientists can still marvel at brave Cindy Lou Who.

If kids 10 to 16 read for fun, not by force

They'll get better jobs in the future workforce.

It has much more effect than if Mum or Dad went to uni,

So pick up that book and make your OWN dreams come true-ni!

When the Blue team were boss back in two thousand and twelve

Just 58% of six-year-olds reached the standards we derved

By the time we had gone

and up to the now,

The figure has soared to 80%

Wow—oh wow—wow!

Primary aged bookworms in England are best,

Now the best of the best—oh, yes—in the West.

[Jack Rankin]

Of Europe at least, and on this I don't jest!
The best little readers of the rest in the West!
The Blue team are glad that the Red team agreed
In their Curriculum Review our reforms they still need
For phonics are king when it comes to learning
How to decode the letters and for stories yearning.
In the Lorax, Seuss taught us to love trees a lot
and said: "Unless someone likes you cares a whole
awful lot,
nothing is going to get better.
It's not."

So now comes the time for my ask of the Reds.
Don't worry or wobble—there's nothing to dread.
For many of them are already decided.
With parents they agree and with their views they've
sided.

For now is the time to ban phones from school proper.
Guidance alone means schools still come a cropper.
Despite their best efforts, it's hard to stop-per.
So come on now Red team—stop delaying and do!
And while we're at it,
ban social media for under-16s too.
There's votes just next week; it isn't too late
To do the right thing 'stead of making us wait.
I thank Honourable Friends for their patience and
time.

I've enjoyed all the speeches, although none others
rhymed.

But isn't that the wonder of novels and stories
It matter not whether Lib Dem, Labour or Tories—
There's one thing on which we can all agree
On World Book Day we can be one and not three!

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): I sincerely hope that
was not AI-generated; it was a very special effort. Follow
that, Minister!

4.4 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Olivia Bailey): I am not sure it is possible to follow
that, although I congratulate the hon. Member for Windsor
(Jack Rankin) on his efforts and his speech entirely in
rhyme. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship
today, Mrs Hobhouse.

I thank all hon. Members for attending and contributing
to this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member
for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), on
securing it and on the valuable work that she is doing as
Chair of the Education Committee. I look forward to
hearing the outcomes of her inquiry into reading for
pleasure.

I really love World Book Day, and I have had a
wonderful World Book Day today; I went on a visit to
talk about school food, and the entire school was dressed
up, including the executive headteacher, who was dressed
as a very impressive Gandalf, complete with a full
beard. It was quite fun to have a full meeting with her to

discuss school food, and I congratulate her on her efforts
and on her lovely school. I also have very fond memories
of World Book Day with my children—who I packed
off this morning in their outfits—especially from when
they were younger. One year, my son chose to dress up
as the green frog from "Room on the Broom", which
I think is a very good choice of outfit.

I was pleased to hear all Members' reflections today.
My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West
Norwood was right to thank all those involved in
running World Book Day and, of course, all parents
scrabbling around to create outfits from brooms and
the like. I look forward to hearing the outcomes of her
inquiry. I also agree with her on the importance of
children being able to find themselves in books—a theme
that we have heard throughout the afternoon.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) gave
a characteristically engaging speech, and I really enjoyed
hearing about the joy that his five grandchildren find in
reading—

Jim Shannon: Six.

Olivia Bailey: Six! I misheard the hon. Member; I do
apologise. And I am sure that they really enjoy listening
to him read to them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight West
(Richard Quigley) made a wonderful speech celebrating
the literary past and present of the Isle of Wight, and
was powerful in his clear determination to secure strong
outcomes for his constituents.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Peter
Swallow) painted a wonderful picture of his Cyclops
outfit—I will be trying to google it—and made a powerful
case for inclusive reading.

For my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West
(Patricia Ferguson), I would like to congratulate Martha
on winning her competition, and all the entrants in my
hon. Friend's constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and
Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) told an amazing story
about the book that she wrote to persuade Amazon to
put Dunstable on the books. I congratulate her on that
—what fantastic efforts!

The hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden)
rightly highlighted the importance that this Government
place on breaking down barriers to opportunity, and
I agree with her that reading for pleasure is a central
part of that—my speech will come on to that. She asked
me about the role of family hubs and the importance of
encouraging children to read at the earliest ages. I reassure
her on that point: it is central to what we are trying to
do with our best start in life strategy.

The hon. Lady—and the hon. Member for Windsor—
also talked about screen time, which is very important
to this Government. I am pleased that we are co-creating
with parents the first ever guidance on screen time for
the under-fives. We have published research that shows
that too much screen time can cause challenges for
language development. The research also says that the
best thing people can do is pick up a book with their
child. We are also publishing screen-time guidance for
older children.

We have also published tougher guidance on phones
in schools to be clear that, from bell to bell, there
should be absolutely no phones in schools. We are

working with attendance and behaviour hubs to make sure that schools are supported to deliver that, and Ofsted will also be inspecting on it. We do not want children in schools being distracted by buzzing phones in their pockets, and we are clear about that. On the wider question of the harms of the online world, I encourage all Members to contribute to our extensive consultation on social media and the online world, which is live now.

As Members have said today, World Book Day is a fantastic worldwide celebration of books and reading, marked in more than 100 countries around the world. I thank everyone for their enormous contribution. We know that reading for pleasure is hugely important and brings a wide range of benefits from increased wellbeing, confidence and empathy to better vocabulary and aptitude for learning, yet just one in three children says that they enjoy reading, which is an all-time low. That is why this Government have launched the National Year of Reading, a UK-wide campaign to tackle the steep decline in reading enjoyment among children, young people and adults.

The National Year of Reading campaign, “Go All In”, emphasises that reading is a great way to explore and deepen our interests and passions. Put simply, if you are into it, read into it. That might be a book about a fairytale world, a fascinating period of history or, for those of us who are passionate about parliamentary procedure—perhaps the hon. Member for Strangford were he still in his place—I suggest “Erskine May”.

Regardless of what we choose to read, the year is packed full of exciting events, webinars, resources and activities happening in communities, libraries, schools and early years settings up and down the country. I encourage all Members to get involved. World Book Day sits right at the heart of the National Year of Reading, offering children a selection of books to choose from for free with their £1 book token, and a range of activities and resources for schools to help generate a national buzz around reading.

As has been noted, libraries are at the heart of the National Year of Reading campaign. I am delighted that this Government have committed more than £10 million to ensure that every primary school in England will have a library by the end of this Parliament and, for secondary schools, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced £5 million to purchase books and reading materials.

Alongside school libraries, public libraries have a strong offer to support children’s development as readers beyond school—for example, through the summer reading challenge—and are part of the vital social and cultural infrastructure of the country. This week, to support the National Year of Reading, the Government announced a funding boost to support local library services in areas with the greatest need to go further in engaging communities to boost library use. Further to that support, the Government will build on excellence by awarding a £1,000 cash prize to each of the five English regional winners of the library of the year award to continue local reading projects.

Reading is not just important for pleasure; it also holds the key to the rest of the curriculum. This financial year, therefore, we have committed £28 million to drive high and rising standards in reading and writing. That funding is delivering a range of support for schools,

including new training for primary schools, to help children progress from the early stages of phonics to reading fluently by the time they leave primary school.

For secondary schools, we have launched a new continuing professional development programme, Unlocking Reading, to improve support for struggling readers in key stage 3. Our aim is that by the end of this academic year, 75% of secondary schools will have access to that training. Also, our RISE, or regional improvement for standards and excellence, English hubs are dedicated to improving the teaching of reading. Since their launch, they have provided targeted support to more than 3,000 schools across England.

In closing, I recognise the important contributions of charities and organisations to promote the importance of reading for pleasure, including World Book Day, the National Literacy Trust, the Reading Agency, the Book Trust and many more. Last year, I had the absolute privilege of meeting Peter Rabbit and the Queen at the Book Trust’s centenary celebration. It was one of my favourite days in the job so far. Reading books like “Peter Rabbit” shaped my childhood and I want that same joy for every child.

Ensuring that our young people in every corner of our country learn to enjoy reading is one of this Labour Government’s key priorities. In this National Year of Reading, we are laying strong foundations for learning, wellbeing and success throughout life. By working in partnership with schools, families, libraries and communities, we can create a lasting legacy where reading for pleasure is valued as an integral part of our childhoods.

4.14 pm

Helen Hayes: I thank all hon. Members who contributed to this debate. It has been a consensual debate, celebrating the power of World Book Day and the benefits of reading.

It has also been an enlightening debate, in which we have learnt about the poetic talent of the hon. Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin), which he should be congratulated on. We have learnt about the Cyclops costume of my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow), which he has mentioned previously in the Select Committee. We are all very anxious to see it in real life. We have heard from the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) about how a whole career can be built on World Book Day costumes, and from my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) about the book she wrote. Congratulations are due to her on her success in getting Dunstable the recognition it deserves.

It was lovely to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) about the benefits of Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library. Many years ago, I spent a summer at Drumchapel, and it is lovely to hear that the community there has benefited from that brilliant initiative. We have heard about literary traditions on the Isle of Wight, and the benefits of reading for communities across the country, including in Northern Ireland.

This has also been a serious debate, in which we have recognised that reading is a powerful part of our toolkit for tackling many of the serious challenges that our children face, from closing the disadvantage gap to improving mental health and wellbeing. We will take those lessons forward from the debate, with a commitment

[Helen Hayes]

to spread throughout the year all the good practice and benefits of the fun and excitement of World Book Day, as we continue to grapple with the challenge of how we support more children in getting back into reading for pleasure.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered World Book Day.

4.16 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 5 March 2026

HOME DEPARTMENT

Migration Reform

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Shabana Mahmood): I am today laying before the House a statement of changes in immigration rules.

Introduction of the visa brake

The number of asylum claims from people who arrived in the UK on a visa or other leave has tripled since the year ending June 2022. Nationals of Afghanistan, Cameroon, Myanmar and Sudan present some of the highest proportions of asylum claims to visas issued. In total, as of September 2025, 15,906 of these nationals are in receipt of Home Office support, including 6,412 individuals in hotels.

To protect UK border security, we are introducing a visa brake for Afghanistan, Cameroon, Myanmar, and Sudan. This will come into force on 26 March 2026. This means we will refuse student visa applications from main applicants who are nationals of Afghanistan, Cameroon, Myanmar, and Sudan. Additionally, we will refuse skilled worker visa applications from main applicants who are nationals of Afghanistan. The brake will not apply to applications made before 26 March. We are publicising the changes so that travellers can plan accordingly.

The brake will meet the intent of the immigration White Paper and the asylum policy statement. Its key aim is to reduce the strain on the asylum system. It will also strengthen public confidence in the immigration system.

The decision to introduce a visa brake has been taken solely for migration and border security reasons. The brake is not intended to be permanent and will be regularly reviewed, with the aim of ensuring that it can be released as soon as it is considered appropriate to do so.

Reducing the duration of refugee and humanitarian protection, permission to stay

We are amending the existing rule to reduce the duration of permission to stay from five years to 30 months for those recognised as refugees or in need of humanitarian protection. Renewal of protection will not be equivalent to making an initial asylum claim. The rules will come into force from 26 March and will apply to adults and families, including accompanied asylum-seeking children who claim asylum on and after 2 March 2026.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children will be exempt from this change and will continue to receive five years' permission to stay. This will remain Home Office policy while the pathway for this cohort is developed.

Procedure and rights of appeal changes for failed asylum seekers

As part of the "restoring order and control" package, I am making changes to the further submissions process, which enables individuals to present evidence following the refusal or withdrawal of their asylum claim, once all appeal rights have been exhausted.

Under these reforms, individuals will be required to meet all validity requirements at the point they make further submissions. This includes: being in the UK when further submissions are made; being a failed asylum seeker, meaning that their initial asylum claim has been refused or withdrawn; and having no outstanding appeal rights or other ongoing protection claims or appeals. Where these requirements are not met, the further submissions may be rejected as invalid without consideration.

In addition, I am also introducing a new provision for implicit withdrawal, similar to the arrangements already in place for initial asylum claims. This will allow the Home Office to treat further submissions as withdrawn where an individual fails to comply with process requirements, including maintaining contact with the Home Office, attending reporting events and responding to requests for information.

Disclosure of information relating to asylum claims when cases are subject to public interest

This minor addition to the existing rule about the disclosure of information relating to an individual's asylum claim clarifies that the rule does not prevent the Home Office from confirming, in certain cases, that an asylum claim has been made by an individual claimant. However, the change also states that the Home Office must ensure that the release of such information is in the public interest.

Introduction of a visit visa requirement for nationals of Nicaragua and St Lucia

I am introducing a visa requirement for all visitors from Nicaragua and St Lucia. This will come into force at 15:00 Greenwich mean time today. Nationals of Nicaragua and St Lucia will also need a direct airside transit visa when transiting through the UK. They will no longer be eligible to apply for an electronic travel authorisation for travel to the UK.

A six-week visa-free transition period will apply for those who already hold an ETA and have confirmed UK travel booked on or before 15:00 GMT on 5 March 2026, where arrival in the UK is no later than 15:00 BST on 16 April 2026. We are publicising these changes to support traveller awareness and planning. This action follows significant numbers of Nicaraguan and St Lucian nationals travelling to the UK for purposes not permitted under visitor rules, including to claim asylum, creating unsustainable pressure at the border and on the asylum system. Concerns also remain about St Lucia's Citizenship By Investment programme. While the UK welcomes ongoing programme reforms, the inherent risk of Citizenship by Investment and issues linked to the programme's past operation and legacy cases further increases the need for a visit visa requirement at this time.

This decision has been taken solely for migration and border security reasons. We keep the border and immigration system under regular review to ensure it continues to work in the UK national interest.

Further extension of the Ukraine permission extension scheme

The Government remain steadfast in their support for the people of Ukraine in the face of Russia's illegal and unprovoked invasion. From the outset of the conflict, the Government have acted decisively and compassionately, offering sanctuary to over 310,000 Ukrainians through the Ukraine family scheme, the Homes for Ukraine scheme, and the Ukraine extension scheme.

Changes to Appendix Ukraine are being introduced to ensure that the Ukraine schemes continue to provide stable and secure protection for those displaced by the ongoing conflict, while giving individuals and families greater certainty about their status in the UK. Extending Ukraine permission extension leave by a further 24 months reflects the Government's commitment to maintaining temporary sanctuary for Ukrainians. Increasing the application window from 28 to 90 days is designed to make the process more accessible and reduce unnecessary pressure on applicants. This extension will remain fee-free, and those granted permission to remain under UPE will continue to be able to access work, benefits, healthcare, and education.

In addition, the changes ensure that no one loses any existing permission they currently hold: any extant leave will be preserved and added to their new grant. This package of amendments is intended to improve clarity, support continuity for families, and provide reassurance while the future situation in Ukraine remains uncertain.

English language requirements for settlement applications

The White Paper "Restoring Control over the Immigration System", published in May 2025, set out the Government's plans to introduce new English language requirements across a broader range of immigration routes, including arrangements for settlement routes. Reformed English language requirements will help to ensure that those who come here to build their lives in the UK can integrate into life in this country. We are commencing implementation of those plans in relation to settlement applications through these rules changes, which increase the English language requirement for settlement to B2 level under the common European framework of reference for languages for a number of routes where the existing requirement is at B1 level.

The changes to the English language requirements for settlement applications will come into force on 26 March 2027, providing those subject to the new requirements with sufficient opportunity to take any steps necessary to meet them. Further changes to English language requirements in relation to settlement applications will be considered in the light of the Government's assessment of responses to the recent consultation on proposals for earned settlement.

For the changes that introduce a visit visa requirement for nationals of Nicaragua and Saint Lucia, due to the need to safeguard the operation of the UK's immigration system, those changes will come into effect at 15:00 on 5 March 2026. The changes relating to the introduction of the visa brake, disclosure of information relating to asylum claims, and reducing the duration of refugee and humanitarian protection permission to stay will come into force on 26 March 2026. The changes to the procedure and rights of appeal changes for failed asylum seekers, global business mobility and scale-up routes, and the further extension of the Ukraine permission extension scheme, will come into force on 8 April 2026.

Revoking the duty to provide asylum support

As set out in the Restoring Order and Control statement, I am making further legislative changes to revoke the current legal obligation to provide asylum support to asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute, and am restoring the power to offer support, as previously provided under domestic law. This is the first step in moving to a more conditional support system. A statutory

instrument is being laid in Parliament today and the policy will come into force in June. The overarching intention is to ensure that support is focused on those who genuinely need it and comply with the system.

Conditions of support and illegal working

I am also amending existing conditions of support legislation to enable the suspension or discontinuation of asylum support where an asylum seeker is working illegally. This will apply where support is provided under sections 4, 95 and 98 of the 1999 Act. Those who are offered asylum support are expected to comply with the conditions of that support. This change is to ensure that asylum support is provided to those who comply with the rules of the asylum system. This will be done via two instruments. The first will amend regulation 20(1) of the Asylum Support Regulations 2000 for section 95 and section 98 support, and this change will come into force on 27 March 2026. The second will amend regulation 6 of the Immigration and Asylum (Provision of Accommodation to Failed Asylum Seekers) Regulations 2005 for section 4 support, and will come into force on 2 June 2026.

Family returns consultation

I am beginning today to consult with a range of partners and stakeholders over a 12-week period on our approach to family returns. Within a fair, effective and orderly immigration and asylum system, it has to be the case that families with no legal right to remain in the United Kingdom depart. The family returns process is designed to maximise voluntary departures and minimise enforcement—but where a family chooses to remain here, compliance with the requirement to leave will be enforced.

The consultation will seek views on the commencement of provisions in part 5 of the Immigration Act 2016 that reform the support available to families with no legal basis to remain in the UK and the framework under which support may be provided or discontinued. These changes will provide clarity and consistency across the system by ensuring that support is focused on those who truly require it, while reinforcing the expectation that families will depart from the UK if they no longer have a lawful basis to stay.

The consultation also seeks views on the Government's approach to enforcing the return of families who do not depart voluntarily. This includes proposals relating to the circumstances in which physical interventions may be used in the course of an enforced return, and the safeguards, oversight and reporting requirements that should apply. These proposals emphasise the need for clear, proportionate processes that enable enforcement activity to proceed safely, with the welfare of children remaining a primary consideration.

A copy of the consultation will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1379]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Slough Borough Council: Best Value Duty

The Minister for Local Government and Homelessness (Alison McGovern): I have previously updated the House on the Government commitment to reset our relationship with local and regional government, to fix the foundations of local government, and to support the sector to build

resilience. Today, I am updating the House on the steps we are taking to support Slough borough council's recovery and reform.

Slough has been in intervention since December 2021, with the intervention extended in November 2024 until November 2026. I am today publishing the latest commissioners' report, received in October, which outlines that the tentative progress identified at Slough borough council in the commissioners' previous report does not appear to have been sustained. Some progress has been made, with the internal audit plan being delivered and the internal audit and counter-fraud teams increasing visibility, targeting training, and becoming an indispensable part of good governance within the council. However, the council is still working to improve the implementation of audit recommendations and procurement compliance through better data use. There remain significant in-year budget pressures and a lack of strategic focus and delivery of transformation plans and programmes.

The Government remain committed to working in partnership with Slough borough council to support compliance with the best value duty and ensure the high standards of governance that residents rightly expect. I also want to acknowledge the diligent and hard-working members of staff at the council who do their utmost to provide essential frontline services for residents.

Nevertheless, I am concerned with the pace of improvement, four years into intervention. Progress remains slow and the council lacks resilience to withstand unforeseen changes. Slough remains far from where we expect it to be at this stage of the intervention, with the council still facing significant budget challenges and requiring transparent governance, and strong, corporate leadership. It remains imperative that the council does not lose sight of the scale of the improvement journey in front of it. I expect the council to continue to put in place all necessary measures required, and I am grateful for the ongoing support of commissioners in ensuring the council's stability.

In light of this slow progress I am today commissioning an external review, led by Dame Mary Ney with support from Will Godfrey. The review will assess Slough borough council's improvement trajectory under intervention and identify what if any further support is required to drive immediate progress and to put the council on a long-term sustainable footing. The role of commissioners at the council will remain unchanged during the review period. I expect the review to report back by May.

I will deposit in the House Library copies of the documents referred to, which are being published on gov.uk today. I will update the House in due course.

[HCWS1378]

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