

Youth Parliament

Friday 17 November 2023

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

11 am

Mr Speaker: [*Applause.*] I can't believe it—I never allow clapping! Welcome to the 13th sitting of the UK Youth Parliament in the House of Commons Chamber. During last year's sitting, the UK Youth Parliament voted for the cost of living and its impact on health to be its priority campaign for 2023. Since then, youth parliamentarians have worked on the "Food for Learning" campaign, which supports free school meals. That theme will be continued in the five debates today.

Today's proceedings will be recorded and broadcast on the UK Parliament's Facebook, X and YouTube channels, and on parliamentlive.tv. I am very pleased to announce that, for the first time, today's proceedings will be even more accessible: British Sign Language interpretation will be available on YouTube.

I am happy to welcome representatives from the UK overseas territories and Crown dependencies, who will have the opportunity to speak about the most important issues of equality facing young people in their territories. I also welcome a great friend, the Leader of the House: Penny Mordaunt. [*Applause.*]

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt):

It is great to see you; thank you for being here. Many powerful men and women have sat in the seats you are sitting in today, and what may surprise you is that all of them, for at least some of their career, would have felt just as nervous as some of you do today. You might be feeling fear and dread, and be worried about how well you will do today, but to be here, all of you had to show courage, and overcome dread and many other obstacles—the dread that says that you don't belong here, or that you are not good enough to be here. As Leader of the House of Commons, let me give you some advice for today: the dread is your friend. The dread means that you will never be under-prepared or complacent. The dread means that you have overcome your fears because you feel so strongly a call to serve others, and that means that you will be good at what you do today. The dread compelled you to know yourself and what is in your heart. If you are nervous today, that is good. Be reassured, and use that energy to do something wonderful here—to listen, learn and inspire others.

I wish you well today. You have chosen some excellent themes and topics to debate. It has been my privilege, alongside teachers, dinner ladies, and local authority directors, to help some of you from a school in my neck of the woods to prepare for today by testing your ideas and answering your questions.

I want to give you some words of advice to spur you on to live fulfilled lives. These are not the words of Cicero, Wilberforce or Churchill; they are from a student called Keith.

"People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centred.

Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.

Do good anyway.

If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies.

Succeed anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.

Do good anyway.

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.

Be honest and frank anyway.

The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds.

Think big anyway.

People favour underdogs but follow only top dogs.

Fight for a few underdogs anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.

Build anyway.

People really need help but may attack you if you do help them.

Help people anyway.

Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth.

Give the world the best you have anyway."

Members, do not underestimate what you can accomplish. Do not doubt the good you can do, and do not forget the importance of having fun while you are doing it. Welcome to the House of Commons. [*Applause.*]

Mr Speaker: I call the another great friend: the shadow Minister for Arts, Heritage and Civil Society, Lilian Greenwood.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the Leader of the House in welcoming Members of the Youth Parliament to the House of Commons, and a great privilege to have the honour of addressing all of you on behalf of the official Opposition. It is always wonderful to see our House of Commons Chamber used by young people from across the UK for their annual debate here in Westminster. The inclusion of Members from the overseas territories and the Crown dependencies is very special, so I extend to them an extra warm welcome today.

As you might appreciate, Mr Speaker, this is the first time that I have spoken from this Dispatch Box since 2016, so I imagine that many of the MYPs in the Chamber today are feeling a mix of excitement and apprehension similar to mine. I hope you will forgive me if I am a little rusty and my hands are shaking, or if I trip over my words. If anyone else shares the same fears—I am sure you don't, after hearing the advice from the Leader of the House; at least I can hold on to this Box!—I can let you into a secret. The *Hansard* Reporters, who report our words, have some magical way of doing so with great accuracy while somehow making our contributions look better on the page than they sometimes felt in the delivery. However, having watched previous sessions of the Youth Parliament, I know that the standard of debate is extremely high, and you will all do yourselves, and the young people who voted to send you here, very proud.

Your task today of articulating the hopes and fears of those we seek to represent lies at the heart of our work in Parliament. Your views and your voices matter. Your ideas and your solutions strengthen our democracy. If I were not here with you today, I would have been tucking

[Lilian Greenwood]

into a school dinner alongside students at Fernwood Primary School in my constituency; I am sure I will do that on another Friday. In a few minutes, you will begin debating your policy proposals around free school meals and food insecurity. I know that you are powerful advocates for the super powers of free school meals. They help young people's mental health and ability to learn, support families and ease worries; but also, sharing a meal can bring people together like nothing else.

You will be listening to the arguments and voting on your priority. This week, perhaps more than most, MPs have been conscious of our duty to make what are sometimes very difficult judgments. I know that each of you will approach your task with thought and diligence, respect for different opinions, and respect for the decisions of your colleagues.

I am looking at Mr Speaker. I only have three minutes, and I had better not take more than my allotted time. I do not want the hard stare, and also I do not want to come between you and your debate. You are still to hear from the right hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew). Good luck. I hope and expect that some, if not many, of you will one day be back in this Chamber as hon. Members. Enjoy your day. Take inspiration from it, and make your electors as proud of you as we are. [Applause.]

Mr Speaker: I know call the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. I have to tell you that he is the Minister for fun, but he is also the No. 1 "Strictly" fan.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): Good morning everyone, and welcome to the UK Youth Parliament House of Commons sitting 2023. It is fantastic to be here today to witness you speaking on the topics that are most important to you all. In fact, yesterday I was telling a friend that I would be here today because you were going to be here, and he said, "So finally the adults are turning up."

My name is Stuart Andrew. I am the Member of Parliament for Pudsey, which is appropriate given that it is Children in Need day, but I am also here in my role as the Minister for Equalities, and the Minister for sport, gambling, civil society and youth at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Promoting youth voice is a key ministerial priority of mine. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Somebody's phone is on. Can we make sure that all phones are switched off, please?

Stuart Andrew: At DCMS, we are committed to championing the voices of young people across Government and increasing the opportunities for young people to be heard. I am personally committed to ensuring that wherever possible, young people are present and can contribute to discussions about policy decisions that will directly impact them.

The UK Youth Parliament is a wonderful, powerful tool enabling all young people to be heard through you, who act as their democratically elected Members. This House of Commons sitting acts as a key milestone in the UK Youth Parliament calendar, and is an important

opportunity for your voices to reach your peers, Ministers and the public. Standing up and debating in front of hundreds of your peers and a live audience is not easy, so well done.

I congratulate you not just on today's session, but on your achievements this past year. This is the second time I have had the opportunity to be part of a UK Youth Parliament event, and I am so impressed by your development since the UK Youth Parliament annual conference in July. It is great to see so many familiar faces. It has been a pleasure to see the hard work and detailed thinking that has gone into your social action project, "Food for Learning". I hope you take this opportunity to look back on all you have learned, the confidence you have gained and the positive impact you have all had during your two-year terms as MYPs. In my role, I am always impressed by how dedicated, committed and articulate our young people are.

The topics selected for today's debates, including holiday hunger and quality of food, are all extremely important. We have all seen and been impacted by the cost of living increases this past year, and I commend you for broaching what can be emotionally difficult topics with tact and poise.

At DCMS, we understand the importance of engaging with young people on policy areas such as those that you will debate today. That is why, in partnership with you, we regularly arrange roundtable discussions with Ministers and officials across a range of Government Departments, so that young people can directly influence policy making. Recent roundtables have included discussions with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about its environmental improvement plan, and we are planning another roundtable with the Department for Education on free school meals. In two weeks' time, I will chair a meeting of the inter-ministerial forum on youth, at which Ministers will be shown a video starring six Members of the Youth Parliament. Members will also hear directly from young people in that discussion. I look forward to showing other Ministers what young people such as you are capable of.

I thank everyone whose hard work and dedication makes events like this possible. Thank you for your continued support for, and commitment to, amplifying the voices of young people. It has been an honour to attend and address you Members of Youth Parliament. I hope you enjoy the rest of your time in the Chamber, and wish you the very best of luck for the future.

Let us remember that democracy is one of the most precious things we have. Just 100 years ago women were not allowed to vote, but around Parliament you can see the signs of the struggle that they won. Democracy only survives on the oxygen of participation, and you are shining examples of that. Please continue to inspire other young people and adults alike to have the confidence to try something new, the passion to pursue their goals and the conviction to champion their communities. Thank you. [Applause.]

Mr Speaker: I want to briefly introduce the new Clerk of the House of Commons, Tom Goldsmith. The young Clerks are in front of me and I want to say thank you to both of them. Tom just wanted to show his face so you can see the future here, but the greater future is in front of me. Thanks very much, Tom.

Holiday Hunger

Mr Speaker: The Youth Parliament will now consider the first motion of the day, on holiday hunger. The full motion is printed on the Order Paper. I call the Member of the Youth Parliament from Nottingham to move the motion.

11.16 am

Abigail Newman (East Midlands): The motion is,

That this House believes that young people deserve to have access to healthy food in school time and during the holidays; calls on the Government to develop a new holiday hunger scheme, which should include provisions for food during school holidays; and further believes that young people who receive free school meals should be enrolled automatically in that scheme.

Nearly a million pupils who receive free school meals during the school term are at risk of holiday hunger. Two million pupils who do not receive free school meals but whose parents experience in-work poverty are also at risk of going hungry. That is 3 million students, just like you and me, facing every school holiday with the fear of going hungry. If you look around you, there are over 200 MYPs in the Chamber right now. For every one of us here today, there are 15,000 young people back in our cities, towns and villages at risk of holiday hunger. This must change.

It is a basic right that all young people have access to healthy food in the school term and the school holidays. Free school meals are a major lifeline for families in poverty, but why stop there? What about those other 90-plus days in the year when families and young people are left to fend for themselves? The whole idea of supporting families daily is completely dropped for 13 weeks of every year.

At present, it can be extremely challenging during the holidays for parents to find ways to feed their children. The Government's own 2020 review on holiday activities and food found that one fifth of parents in London at some point had to skip meals to feed their children. Marcus Rashford is the most high profile campaigner for ending holiday hunger. He can remember as a boy visiting soup kitchens and food banks, and his mother going hungry. He said that the system was not built for families like his to succeed. Surely no mother or father should have to sacrifice their own health to feed their children when the system can do better?

We have the opportunity to help lift hundreds of thousands of young people from food poverty simply by giving them a hot meal during the school holidays. We know it can be done. During the pandemic, the Government expanded holiday hunger schemes and helped to temporarily remove young people from food poverty. So let us seize this opportunity to meet the needs of all young people, wherever they live in the United Kingdom, and finally eradicate holiday hunger. *[Applause.]*

Mr Speaker: I now call the Member of the Youth Parliament from the city of Glasgow to second the motion.

Zainab Adeleye (Scotland): Hello everyone. I am Zainab. I have burgundy hair, I am wearing a blue suit and my pronouns are she/her.

Summer holiday, Christmas holiday, Easter holiday, half-term breaks: they all add up to 131,040 minutes. For many young people, those 131,040 minutes are shaped by the absence of nourishment during what should be a time of joy and relaxation.

Members of the Youth Parliament, let me tell you about some young people from Scotland. In the course of my consultation, I spoke to a young person named Debbie. She explained, "Free school meals help reduce pressure on me and my family, but during the holidays we are left alone." Sarah, another recipient stated, "I begin to worry when holidays are around the corner, because I know I won't get meals anymore." I, Zainab, as a former recipient of free school meals, know what it feels like to think you have help, only to find out that it is contingent on what time of the year it is.

In 2020, Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament passed a motion with overwhelming agreement—99%—calling on the Scottish Government to eradicate poverty-induced hunger and ensure reliable access to food for all of Scotland's young people. That speaks to the urgency of the matter and the relevance to the young people we are elected to represent. My mother always says, "Anything worth doing is worth doing well." We have started with free school meals, so let us develop it into a scheme that prevents holiday hunger, first working actively to stop hunger in and of itself. MYPs, your vote today is a vote for change and for the future. Most importantly, it is a vote for life.

Holiday hunger is not inevitable. It is stoppable, preventable and solvable. It is time to transform these 131,040 minutes from a harrowing ordeal into a period of hope and security for all affected young people. MYPs, it is our duty to make sure that no young person such as Debbie, Sarah or me ever feels alone again. The youth of a country are not just its future; we are its essence and vitality. So how, MYPs, can a country truly survive without the wellbeing of its youth? Let's all think about that. *[Applause.]*

Mr Speaker: The general debate is now open and you have one minute in which to speak. Let us go to the North West, with a Youth Member from Leigh.

Benjamin Robinson (North West): I am Ben and I am from Leigh. Parliament likes to say that young people are the future of this country, yet, according to a recent article in *The Guardian*, the ridiculous cost of living means that the price of an average grocery bill has now increased to a total of £454. This increase in food insecurity will lead to a generation of students who will regularly attend school not for the wonder of education, but for the nourishment of food—that is simply disgraceful. According to the Child Poverty Action Group, 4.2 million young people are in poverty, but only 1.4 million young people are covered by the holiday activities and food programme, so it must be extended and reformed.

The first change that should be made to HAF is to its means-tested income threshold. Let me take the child tax credit as my example, where, according to my local authority, the maximum income is £16,000 but the cost of living for a family of four in the region is £32,000. That gross disparity will lead only to young people and their families suffering.

[Mr Speaker]

Secondly, I propose an expansion of a local initiative called “No Child Should Go Hungry”, which has provided more than 13,000 emergency food cards, according to the Greater Manchester Combined Authority website, and works with partner agencies to further its cause.

Thirdly, it should be a legal requirement that food is accessible for young people. Access to food is a human right. School is a lifeline for children in poverty, and although many look forward to the school holidays as a time of relaxation and adventure, for those less fortunate it is a time of great anxiety and concern. So let’s make these necessary and simple changes to allow children to enjoy the innocence of youth, because otherwise we should all start to question whether Great Britain is really so great if we cannot feed our children. [Applause.]

Mr Speaker: Let’s pick someone from London. I call the young Member there.

Simran Bodh (London): My name is Simran Bodh and I represent Brent in north London. It is often said that young women are the shock absorbers of poverty, and that is no surprise. Among women, domestic violence is the most common adverse life event for those facing hunger. In my constituency, one in five women referred to food banks had experienced domestic violence in the previous 12 months. You do not know the last time the person next to you ate. You do not know whether they are facing domestic violence. This Christmas, one in five of these young women will be hungry, scared and abused. So today I ask the House to come together to put women at the forefront of our discussion on holiday hunger. While to most they may be forgotten, to me they are victims of deep-rooted violence and deserve to have the basic right of feeling safe and full this Christmas. One meal at a time we are one step closer to making the young women of Brent and of the whole nation feel heard and seen. Thank you. [Applause.]

Ashleigh Watkins (Wales): My name is Ashleigh Watkins and I represent Wales. I am wearing a pink suit and I have dark hair. I dedicate this speech to my mum, who made sure that I had three meals a day, every day, even through the cost of loving crisis, and who raised me to be grateful but to speak up and use my voice to help those less fortunate than me.

We, as a Youth Parliament, selected the free school meal campaign to help those in need. Some 3 million children in the UK are starving during Christmas holidays, inset days and half-term breaks, so how can we stand by and not prioritise those people? Victims of holiday hunger are the cause of the campaign and we must bring them the justice they deserve. I understand there are people here who will never experience holiday hunger, nor ever have to wonder where their next meal comes from, but I assure them that the issue is real and urge them to make this motion a priority, as that is a privilege.

The issues we are campaigning against can be easily fixed. Holiday hunger could be ended in a matter of months if the UK Government really wanted to do that. I do not enjoy donating to food banks or want to have to be the reason someone eats, but I am. Why have the Government not already put motions in place to feed starving children?

I do not enjoy fundraising for the hungry at Christmas: I wish I could campaign for something different, such as my school and community, but I cannot do that until the Government attains a few basic human rights. I do not enjoy having to use the TikTok watermelon seed filter to feed starving children, but I am sick of seeing it. I urge Members to vote for holiday hunger to give food to starving children and to give the UK back its basic human rights, instead of prioritising the jungle and inflation. [Applause.]

William Blewitt (East of England): My name is William Blewitt and I am from the East of England. I am glad my friend mentioned the issue, because to me it is an utterly absurd notion that dependency on free school meals is based around what time of year it is, so all of a sudden, because it is no longer term time, people are no longer entitled to them. That is a ridiculous notion. How can we claim to be advocates for the young people of this country if we watch them starve and struggle for such a massive part of the year?

To stand by and watch is complacency. If we stand by and watch that happen, we are part of the issue. Explain to the people who put you in this Chamber today, by putting a tick in a box next to your name, that you are happy and complacent to watch them starve during the school holidays. We are privileged to be standing here today to speak up about these issues. To stand up and watch these issues continue, to say nothing, to do nothing and to watch people starve in those holidays is not acceptable.

I urge each and every one of you to use the voice that you are so privileged to have to stop that situation now. To ignore the issue is to ignore the basic human right we are meant to grant every person, including every young person, in this country. Let us stop ignoring the issue—and stop it today. [Applause.]

Deneb Marden-Rull (South East): My name is Deneb Marden-Rull, MYP for Brighton and Hove.

Being hungry during the holidays is possibly the worst circumstance a child can be in. With no free school meals or support from teachers, children are left helpless. Powerless parents from low-income households must rely on cheap, unhealthy food options or make huge sacrifices in order to put food on the table. Ignorant, the Government believe they have solved the problem with the holiday activities and food programme, but that is far from the reality.

Crucially, the HAF programme covers only a tiny proportion of holidays: during the six week—42 day—summer break, meal provision is offered for only 16 days; during the two week Christmas break, only four days are offered; and during the half terms, there is absolutely no food provision whatsoever. That leaves the over 2 million UK children who are eligible for free school meals to suffer from hunger during the holidays.

Consequently, many families turn to their only option: cheap fast food. No wonder almost one in four children in year 6 is obese. Holiday hunger is therefore not only devastating in itself, but a cause of many other problems that our young people face. That leaves one priority: to put food provision in place for every day of every holiday. Let us ensure no child goes hungry this Christmas.

Ellie Bealing (South West): I am Ellie Bealing and I represent the south-west. We have an unlikely privilege, not shared by our doctors, teachers or fellow young

people. We have the ability to represent the voiceless and to truly inspire a change in the way that young people are viewed in our society.

Today, I represent the 21,000 young people in Somerset who face food poverty. Those 21,000 faces could fill this Chamber over 50 times. Somerset is a very small but important part of the UK, so just imagine those who go unheard, have developed unhealthy eating habits and grown frustrated by their constant hunger when they cannot go to school.

There are around 175 days on which our schools shut their doors and leave young people vulnerable to the threat of hunger. As a supposedly empathetic society we must do better. We must act better to safeguard those individuals. Hunger is not imaginary. Hunger is a reality and we must not become bystanders to this during the holiday period. This simply must be prioritised as the marginalisation of millions goes on under our watch.

Ryan Kearney (Northern Ireland): It is an honour to stand before you today in support of the motion on holiday hunger. It is an issue that reflects the struggles of young people and families in Northern Ireland and across the UK. It is disappointing to note that Northern Ireland stands alone as the only part of the UK without a holiday hunger scheme in place.

In March of this year, we witnessed the holiday hunger scheme, which provided overwhelming support for families, being scrapped by the Secretary of State. It was a decision made in a punishing Budget. Those cuts have had a profound effect on families, adding to the difficulties they face already in the cost of living crisis, with one parent saying that her family face challenges every single day.

The restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly is imperative in reinstating the holiday hunger scheme. A functioning Government are vital to ensure that the needs of young people on these issues are represented and addressed. We must move towards a political climate where politicians get around the table and address the decisions that are being made with the wellbeing of young people and families in mind.

It is crucial that Northern Ireland is funded correctly to allow the Executive to continue funding schemes such as that on holiday hunger, which will only benefit young people. After all, adequate funding is not a luxury; it is a necessity.

Aonpreeya Petchatchua (Yorkshire and Humber): I am Aonpreeya Petchatchua from Yorkshire and Humber.

Holiday hunger is no laughing matter. Hunger does not suddenly stop once the school term ends. Poverty and lack of money do not suddenly stop once the school term ends. Three hundred and fifty thousand more children were pulled into relative poverty in 2021-22. That means that 20% of all UK children were in poverty, which was an increase on the 3.6 million in 2010-11. These statistics make no sense for one of the richest countries in the world.

Britain's population holds £6 trillion in private wealth, surpassing France, Italy, Canada and Australia. Why do we call ourselves a first-world country when we cannot feed our people? The UK's food poverty rate is

now among the highest in Europe. Let me stress again what my fellow MYPs have said previously: 4 million children were in food poverty as of January 2020.

The majority of the UK population and some of the people in this Chamber are very privileged and will never experience what it is like to go hungry. I understand that this might not seem like a sustainable and radical decision, but we, as people in a position of influence, can make the first step on a very long road to make a better future for our generation. It is our duty to make a massive decision that will change the course of tomorrow. No matter the large monetary costs or the doubts that you may have about it, it is essential that we do something about this.

Tamsin Gold (Scotland): I am Tamsin Gold and the representative from central Scotland. I have a black top and long dark hair.

How is it fair that, when a young person goes on holiday from school for one, two or even six weeks, they do not have access to a hot meal? It is not fair. No pupil should be left feeling hungry during the holidays. No pupil should be unable to access nutritious, healthy food because of the holidays. The proposal says that inset days and teacher in-service days should be included as a holiday. That is paramount to ensure that no young person is left to go hungry.

In March this year, the Scottish Youth Parliament published a "Right to Food" report. Scottish young people said that they wanted decisionmakers to take action. They want food deliveries to home instead of needing to get support in person, and support for home-educated pupils. This is to ensure that no young person is disadvantaged when trying to access food.

The fact that young people have to worry about where their next meal will come from during the holidays is inexcusable and an infringement of their rights. Article 6 of the UN convention on the rights of the child states that every child has a right to life, and Governments must do all they can to ensure that children survive and develop to their full potential. In order for this right to be met, young people must be able to access food at all times throughout the year.

To conclude, holiday hunger needs to be the priority of UK MYPs' food for learning campaign, because no young person should go hungry during holidays and have their holidays taken up worrying about where their next meal is going to come from—if they even get one. Food needs to be accessible to all young people. Thank you.

James Hickie (North East): I am James, MYP for Northumberland. Before tackling the issue of free school meals, why not consider the number of people who are barely supported at all during the holidays? That is not even to mention the two weeks at Christmas and the six weeks during the summer when the expectation is that parents will pay to heat the house, pay for food and then sometimes pay for presents on top. This leads me to ask: why is there so little help available for a family in poverty when the backbone of free school meals is taken away?

At my school, the basics of a warm meal, a drink and a snack cost £3.60. Over at least six weeks in the summer, that amounts to £151.20 just for lunch—£151.20 per

child that every parent has to find on top of the priority issues of heating and activities. Why is there so little help for a family when the backbone of free school meals is taken away? More funding is needed. A simple solution is more funding for the holiday and food programme, as these students are more likely to experience social isolation, less likely to access activities, and less likely to stay mentally and physically healthy over the holidays. This is prominent where I am from in the north-east, where people are becoming more reliant on food banks, with the Newcastle West End food bank sending out more than 2,000 food parcels each month. Finally, with that being the ultimate proof, why is there so little help for a family when the backbone of free school meals is taken away?

Lois Adela Boateng Bronya (North West): My name is Lois Adela, and I am one of the MYPs for Manchester, in the North West. Holiday hunger is a pressing issue that affects many young people, and it is vital to ensure that they have access to meals not only during school but outside term time. Here in the UK, the statistics are concerning. Did you know that over 4 million children are living in poverty in the UK, and that during term breaks a lot of them struggle to get regular meals?

It is crucial to create provisions like holiday food programmes and initiatives to bridge this gap and make sure that every young person gets the nourishment they need and deserve. As the UN convention on the rights of the child states, the right to food is a fundamental right that we must prioritise and ensure for all young people, so I urge Members to vote for this matter. Let us advocate for each other.

Charlie Timmins (West Midlands): My name is Charlie, and I am from Dudley in the West Midlands. As we approach the season of joy and celebration, it is important to acknowledge the harsh reality that casts a shadow over the festivities for many families across the UK. While we adorn our homes with lights and gather around tables laden with abundance, countless children and their families face the grim reality of hunger during school breaks. For these families, the absence of free school meals, which provide a vital lifeline, amplifies the struggle that parents face to put food on the table.

It is disheartening to imagine children counting down the days until school resumes, not for the joy of learning but for a hot meal. The statistics for my local authority are alarming, with reports revealing the detrimental impact of holiday hunger on children's health, wellbeing and educational attainment.

This issue is not just a matter of policy or statistics; it is a call to our collective conscience. No child should endure the pains of hunger while others revel in plenty. However, temporary solutions are not enough. We need change. Advocating for policies that ensure every child has access to nutritional meals all year round is crucial. This holiday season, we need to use our Christmas

spirit to ensure that those who are entitled to free school meals can eat not just on Christmas day but for all the holidays yet to come.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Back Benchers. I now call the Member from Manchester to conclude the debate.

Daanya Isa (North West): MYPs, I am Daanya Isa, and I stand before you today, like my colleagues, to further emphasise the critical importance of addressing the issue of holiday hunger. While we often associate holidays with joy and celebration, for many in our communities this period signifies a time of uncertainty, deprivation and hunger. This issue affects our most vulnerable members, especially children. During the school year, many students rely on school meals as a primary source of nutrition. However, when schools close for holidays, those children are left without access to these crucial meals, leading to a stark disparity in food security.

To make matters worse, holiday hunger places additional strain on families who are already struggling to make ends meet. Parents are forced to choose between putting food on the table and other essential needs, leading to long-term consequences for not only their own wellbeing but the overall stability of our communities. How is it that we as a nation can have no issue with more than 60% of parents with household incomes of less than £25,000 saying they are not always able to put food on the table outside of term time? It is simply appalling. We cannot let this be normalised. We cannot let this remain a reality.

The upsetting truth is that this issue goes beyond mere statistics. It is about the lives of children and the future of our society. Not only does holiday hunger threaten the physical and mental wellbeing of these young individuals by hindering their growth and development; it perpetuates a cycle of poverty and educational inequality, making it even harder for them to break free from these circumstances.

Holiday hunger is not a problem that can be ignored or swept under the rug. It is a pressing matter that demands our attention and action. We must work together to ensure that every child has access to the nourishment they need and deserve, regardless of the time of year. Whether through community initiatives, Government support or partnerships with local organisations, we can make a tangible difference. In addressing holiday hunger, we are not just providing meals; we are investing in the future of our society and giving every child a fair chance to succeed and break the cycle of poverty.

It is time to stand up and take action, to ensure that the joy of holidays is truly inclusive, leaving no child behind. Our collective effort in addressing this issue will define the kind of society we want to build for future generations. Let us not disappoint the millions of children living in poverty in the UK. Vote for holiday hunger to be our priority, to ensure that no child suffers during their times of joy.

Quality of Food

Mr Speaker: The Youth Parliament will now consider the second motion of the day, on quality of food. The full motion is printed on the Order Paper. I call the Member of Youth Parliament from Hampshire to move the motion.

11.41 am

Dmitrijs Meiksans (South East): The motion is,

That this House believes that all children deserve access to nutritious, ethical and healthy food; calls on the Government to update guidance on the quality of food provided in all education settings; and further believes that guidance should include equal amounts of options across different dietary needs, including religious and cultural requirements.

Members of the Youth Parliament, I am Dmitrijs Meiksans, and I am the Member of Youth Parliament for the constituency of North West Hampshire.

Members may have come across on TikTok or Instagram “Get Ready with Me” videos of influencers getting ready for the day. So let us get ready for the school or college day with me, you, us and other young people in our constituencies. It is the morning. We are running around, trying to find our backpacks and bags, ensuring we pack everything we need for the school day. What exactly do we pack into our backpacks? Calculators and compasses, rulers and pens, pencils and paper. But what about fuelling us for the school day? What about good-quality food that is nutritious, ethical and healthy, with what we need to be able to succeed throughout the school day?

While some young people opt to bring food with them to school, most young people rely and depend on their schools to equip them with the food they need for the day. Just as schools should be nourishing young people with skills, knowledge, equations and literature, they should also be providing them with nutritious, ethical and healthy food. That is why we must ensure that the quality of the food young people are provided with at school is to the highest of standards, consistent and will equip young people to succeed. This food must also be ethically sourced, supporting local communities and businesses, as well as ensuring that no ultra-processed foods are to be found.

Members may have noticed that I keep repeating the words nutritious, ethical and healthy. That is the fundamental basis to consistency, ensuring that the critical aspects of what good-quality food looks like in schools are upheld to the strictest of standards possible by not only the Secretary of State for Education but the overall Government.

While the Youth Parliament welcomes the Government’s school food standards practical guidance, which was updated in February this year, the guidance is not yet enforced, and we are still seeing mass discrepancies in the consistency of the quality of food that young people in North West Hampshire and across the country receive, with each young person getting something different on their trays every single day. I call on my fellow Members, let us do something about this. Let us champion good-quality food that young people can depend upon and not have to worry about when they are getting ready for the day.

Mr Speaker: I now call the Member of Youth Parliament for Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole to second the motion.

Dylan Rees-Coshan (South West): I took a trip to my canteen yesterday, and a Biscoff brownie was £1.30 cheaper than a salad. As we debate at an incredibly tumultuous time for British politics, we are under threat of being forgotten by our legislators. Something that applies to all of us in this Chamber is the quality of the food we eat. Many of us sitting here in these hallowed halls today have access to healthy food that supplements and boosts our learning, but hundreds of thousands of young people across the country are being failed. In these times of economic turmoil, we still need to see to it that every young person has a healthy and nutritious meal to keep their brains working throughout the school day. If an unhealthy quick fix is given cheaper than a healthy one, we need to show the Government the sobering reality of this situation.

We also need to remember the importance of ensuring that every child is catered for in Britain, regardless of their religion, dietary requirements or where they live. Our schools are made up of a huge range of students with religious beliefs, but, devastatingly, a fellow MYP in my area attends a school where they cannot receive halal or kosher options. Contrary to our former Home Secretary’s remarks, I believe multiculturalism should be celebrated, and we need to see to it that every young person receives a meal that has sustenance and adheres to what they believe in. That is incredibly crucial to any young person’s education, no matter who they are. [*Applause*]*—thank you, I really appreciate it.*

Students should not have to worry or fret over what they are putting in their bodies on top of all the current in-school stresses already piled on them by the Executive on their side of the Dispatch Box. It should be up to our Government, private companies and the food institutions that give us our food to think about what they are giving to young people. With that said, MYPs, I call on you, my friends in the south-west and the metropolitan mega-powers responsible for looking after millions of our constituents, to vote for the quality of food Bill. I am not denying that a Biscoff brownie is delicious, but we need affordable, healthy and high-quality meals, as everyone needs food and fuel to perform.

Zara Šošić (South West): Children are living things, and their needs do not simply dissipate the moment that they leave school grounds. I do not want to believe that the idiom, “Out of sight, out of mind”, should ever be a phrase related to this campaign. Young people having their only meal a day at school is a reality for too many of my constituents and, I am sure, for many of yours. Yes, the quality of food is so important. What use is quality of food if they only receive it for so few days? There is only a chance that any of this can pass. Why waste it on something that can only happen if it gets through? What we need is everyone to be fed. If you vote for anything other than holiday hunger, you are just enabling the school system and our Government to neglect these children at the most vulnerable times in their lives. I urge you: let holiday hunger trump anything else you are feeling today.

Prayksha Hegde (South East): I am Prayksha Hegde, and I am the MYP for Milton Keynes. We must ensure that young people have the vital access they need to a

healthy, nutritious meal. For the 4 million children living in food-insecure households, a school meal may be the only nutritious meal they have access to. Studies have shown that nutritious school food can improve attainment at school and reduce the occurrence of preventable disease. The current inability of young people to have access to nutritious meals is a public health emergency. I urge all MYPs to vote for the quality of food to be our priority focus. Let us invest in the future generation and the citizens of today for a better tomorrow.

Brando Halloum (Yorkshire and Humber): My name is Brando Naïm Halloum. I am in a blue suit and a blue shirt. There are 4.2 million children in poverty, violations of human rights for levels of poverty, and malnourishment has doubled in the last six months. I am not talking about some faraway land. I am talking about the UK—this country, your constituents. How dare we spend close to £100 billion on HS2, which is a mere shadow of what we were promised? In our classrooms, let me remind you, child malnourishment has doubled. How can we focus when we do not have food for thought? How dare we fund other militaries with weapons to murder? Malala said that one pen and one book are the most powerful weapons to change the world, yet children sit in our classes malnourished, with nothing to think about but the pain in their stomachs.

Prem Raghvani (North West): I am Prem Raghvani, MYP for Oldham, the home of the first test-tube baby. In 2016, a teenage girl named Natasha ate a sandwich at an airport. Unbeknownst to her, sesame seeds, which she was allergic to, were baked into the bread. Sadly, she passed away on her flight. This serves as a reminder not only that schools should label food with allergens, but that there should be options available, considering that people have varying dietary requirements for health, religious and cultural reasons. In schools and colleges, especially up north in places such as Oldham, there are rarely options for coeliacs and vegans, for instance. There should be a greater variety of nutritious food that is inclusive to all.

I am a Hindu with a strict vegetarian diet. I can rarely find any vegetarian food in schools, as it contains egg, and there are barely any vegan options besides a piece of fruit and water. Given that we live in a multicultural society, this should change. That is why I urge Members to vote for the quality of food to be a priority.

Myra Soni (London): Good morning, everyone. I am Myra Soni, and I am the MYP for Westminster. Do we all agree that young people of today are leaders of tomorrow? Do we all agree that we are what we eat? Do you want the future of tomorrow to be pizza, chips, sugary drinks and cakes? That, MYPs, is what is on the menu at schools today. Across primary and secondary schools, ultra-processed, unhealthy foods account for 64% of meals. That is simply unacceptable.

The consequences of our failures have already begun manifesting themselves, with one in three children in the UK overweight or obese. Every child, regardless of their background or postcode, deserves access to nourishing food—food that will help fuel their minds and nurture their dreams, and help them fulfil their potential. We cannot wait for this to become a priority. As a collective, we have a duty to act to ensure that the leaders of

tomorrow are not sitting in classrooms with rumbling stomachs. The time is now. We must bring nutritious and empowering food into every school. The future and success of our youth hangs in the balance.

Zack Hellard (Wales): I am Zack Hellard, the MYP for Cardiff, so I suppose I should be saying “bore da” to all of you. There is a 10-year difference in life expectancy between the richest and poorest areas of my constituency. That is due especially to high-salt, high-fat, high-sugar foods—foods that, according to the United Nations, affect children in particular. These foods should be limited and regulated, especially in our schools, because that is where they do their damage. They affect the most vulnerable, who, as we learned from the previous debate, rely on them. They affect our ability to learn, they affect attendance, and they affect our health overall.

This debate will decide our future. It will decide our health. It will decide not only our leaders, but our future citizens and our position globally. We must protect every single person in this country from the rise in obesity and in illnesses caused by obesity, poor health and poor nutrition. We are a high-income country, yet my constituency and my country fail on development indicators. We are one of the poorest regions, and we are struggling in a high-income country. I look at all of you and say: “We can do better.” This is why I fight today to improve nutrition and our access to good foods. I thank you all for your time, and I hope you consider Wales going forward.

Katie Dunn (East of England): With the rising cost of living, we see access to healthy food being taken away from more and more people. When we cannot go into a supermarket and afford healthy food any more, people from disadvantaged backgrounds are no longer able to eat healthily at home. In our schools, the healthy food is the expensive food; we do not have decently priced healthy food in our schools. If your schools are anything like mine, a small cup of fruit costs about £1.20 but, as was said earlier, a dessert costs about 40p. It is no surprise that one in four kids in year 6 are obese when they cannot afford healthy food in or out of school. That is why I urge you to vote for this motion, to ensure that everyone is allowed to have the best start in life by eating food that fuels their brain and allows them to learn productively and live their best life.

Alasdair Marshall (Scotland): My name is Alasdair Marshall. I am the MYP for South Scotland. I am wearing a blue suit and have short brown hair.

I want to emphasise the importance of prioritising the quality of food in school meals and supporting our local British farmers. Children and young people’s health is directly linked to the nutrition they receive. By investing in high-quality, locally sourced ingredients, we not only enhance our health but contribute to the success of our farmers. Nutrient-rich foods support concentration, energy levels and overall academic performance. By prioritising the quality of food in school meals, we are investing in children and young people, and nurturing healthy and thriving individuals. In the Scottish Youth Parliament’s “Young People’s Right to Food” report, 87.6% of respondents said they want better-quality food in their school meals. That only strengthens the argument that quality of food should be a priority: it is what young people are directly asking for.

Supporting our local farmers is vital, and it goes beyond economic considerations; it fosters a sustainable and resilient food system. British farmers work tirelessly 365 days of the year to provide us with fresh, wholesome and ethically produced produce, yet 66% of them do not feel valued by the public. By choosing to source our school meals locally, we strengthen our agricultural sector, reduce environmental impact by shortening the distance between farm and fork, and ensure a more secure food supply for our communities.

Let's commit to prioritising the quality of food in school meals and supporting our British farmers. This is not just a matter of nourishing children and young people. It is an investment in a healthier, more sustainable future for generations to come. Together we can build a powerful foundation for the wellbeing of children and young people and support our British farmers.

Georgia Robson (North East): My name is Georgia Robson. I am the MYP for Hartlepool in the North East, and I have gingery-brown hair and am wearing a black jumper.

Quality of food has been identified as a massive issue in Hartlepool through surveys and multiple discussions at youth voice groups. School meals are not up to standard, and their prices continue to rise. This means that those who currently access free school meals cannot afford the low-quality meals that they should be able to purchase. Often, the amount of food produced does not meet the number of students waiting for it, meaning that students and young people go hungry or are left with a drink or a snack to get them through the day. Ordinarily, students are not offered a good-quality meal, and the struggle only gets worse if you have dietary requirements, as others have mentioned. Those who are vegetarian or vegan or have intolerances are given the bare minimum. They should have similar options to their peers.

I believe, after consistent complaints from young people in my constituency, that this should be a main focus of the Youth Parliament, as this issue affects so many of the people we represent. If we are to move forward with our campaign, it is important that we prioritise this issue. Young people should be offered good-quality, healthy meals in all schools and colleges, no matter their dietary requirements.

Alex Crompton (North West): I am the Member of the Youth Parliament for Wigan and Leigh—those on this Bench know full well by now that I am a Wiganer. I asked for this quality of food debate. It is about quality, but really it is about equality. You could go to multiple high schools in Wigan and see a variety of different meals, from four chips and a burger to 10 chips and a burger—who knows the difference? Equality in access to food will equal equality in the chance to flourish: that is the fact of what we will vote on.

Mr Speaker, as a rugby league fan, you might know the phrase, "This is our year." It is 2023. When will it be the year of the kids of Wigan, of my part of the north and, ideally, of the north-west and the entirety of England?

Sophia Suddaby (Yorkshire and Humber): My name is Sophia and I am the MYP for York. The nutritional quality of free school meals is of the utmost importance. For many, it is their only hot meal of the day—or

possibly their only meal, full stop. School food standards are often poorly implemented, with a severe lack of monitoring and accountability, and therefore the responsibility very much falls on individual schools and catering companies to decide what should be on the menu. Food for Life estimated that 60% of secondary schools in England are failing to comply with school food standards. As an example, all schools should provide at least two portions of vegetables in every meal, but a shocking 45% of young people said that their school does not even provide one.

There are over 2 million young people on free school meals, and for a large number of them their free school meal is their only meal of the day. It is a lifeline, and for that one meal to be filled with inadequate, ultra-processed, unnatural ingredients is a disgrace. When healthy food is on average three times more expensive than processed food, we must ensure a strong provision of it in free school meals so that the needs of those who rely on these meals as their only source of vital vitamins and nutrients are met. We must therefore call for a nationwide review of menus and ingredients immediately.

Dev Sharma (South East): My name is Dev Sharma. I am 18 and I am the Member of the Youth Parliament for Winchester.

Ten years. In our own neighbourhoods, a silent, restless clock ticks away, marking a disparity not just in wealth, but in the very years of life granted to our young people. In my area, a child born in a disadvantaged background, just streets away from affluence, is destined to have 10 years less to live. That is 10 years less to dream; 10 years less to make a mark on the world—a decade-long disparity, caused by preventable, food-related ill health.

Our nation's strength is measured not by its wealth, but by how it uplifts the most vulnerable. A country that allows such stark differences in life expectancy based on socioeconomic status fails in its fundamental duty of care to its citizens. Imagine the dreams unfulfilled, the talents undiscovered, the laughter silenced 10 years too soon. That is the cost of inaction. It is not just the pang of hunger: it is the slow erosion of hope, the stunting of potential, the deepening of societal divides. Today, in this esteemed Chamber, we have the power to rewrite this narrative. We can turn the tide against the inequalities that steal 10 years from the lives of my friends. I imagine a world where the length of a child's life is determined not by their postcode, but by their potential.

Mr Speaker, as I stand here today, I may not be able to outline the complexities of education funding models, but I can tell you about the empty stomachs and the silent cries of hunger in our classrooms. We, the youth, ask for those 10 years back. Young people, we are not just part of our nation's future; we are the very foundations on which it will be built. Our potential to dream, to achieve and to thrive fundamentally depends on access to sustained nutrition. If we neglect this issue, we should not be taken aback when the foundations of our futures begin to erode. Our plea, our hope, our dream of proper nutrition must be—

Mr Speaker: Order. Everyone is meant to have one minute. That is well over two minutes. Please, help each other, because I have to try to get round everybody.

Jake Fletcher (East Midlands): Thank you for letting me speak. My name is Jake Fletcher and I am from Nottinghamshire. I have always been told to stand up for those who cannot speak. I feel that it is crucial that high-quality food should always stay the same. It is not fair that anyone should lack the nutrition or vitamins to function throughout the day.

In this hard world we live in today, it is crucial that we at least get something to cope with it. I think that holidays or no holidays, rich or poor area, big or small town, we should all have the same standard across the UK. *[Applause.]*

Grace Andrews (South East): My name is Grace, and I represent Reading. The debate about quality versus quantity is not new, yet why should we have to compromise one to preserve the other? Public health experts have called for urgent legislation after research found that ultra-processed food makes up two thirds of the average secondary school meal in the UK. Councils put the blame for that statistic on a lack of funding, and the Government claim that their hands are tied, but isn't it astonishing that the sixth biggest economy in the world claims that it does not have the financial means to provide any better?

We take great pride in being a country that provides free school meals for all children aged four to seven, yet the need for a healthy, sustaining diet does not come to a halt once you turn eight. We know the effects of an unhealthy diet and of habitual behaviour from a young age. Free school meals should be for every child, but quality should not be compromised. Please join me in my plea for healthier, sustaining food in our school meals, and a ban on junk food in schools, where schools use it in a poor attempt to feed students. *[Applause.]*

Obed Poto-Poto (London): A world without good-quality, nutritious food is something that I do not stand for. A world where some students cannot eat school meals due to their requirements is a world that I do not support, yet this is part of the story told to me by one of my constituents. The inequality in the quality of food up and down the country is causing regional disparities, and is leading to children being unable to focus because they are not receiving the correct food to fuel their brain. As a recipient of free school meals, I understand their benefits, and so does the Child Poverty Action Group. Studies show that increasing the provision of quality, healthy school meals in Britain can increase student achievement by up to 8% at key stage 2.

We know that the quality of food can drastically affect cognitive ability, and if we agreed this motion, it would be a massive step in ensuring that young people get good-quality food. However, a key component is standardisation of not only the type of food available, but its quality. That would address environmental considerations in the sourcing of ingredients, thus solving the issue of low quality. At a time when those who can

afford it are moving towards more environmentally friendly, good food, surely it is necessary to give the same opportunity to young people. I therefore call for food to be made with consideration for the environment; that is what standardisation covers. By voting for standardisation, you are not only permitting young people to have better-quality food, but permitting more young people to access better-quality meals. MYPs, I implore you to switch your vote from quality of food to standardisation. *[Applause.]*

Mr Speaker: I call the Member of the Youth Parliament who will sum up: the Member from Cardiff. *[Applause.]*

Shifa Shahzad (Wales): I am Shifa, the MYP for Cardiff. I begin by acknowledging how fortunate we are to be here today, considering the unfolding global situation. I rise to emphasise once more the importance of the quality of food in our nation's schools. We have already seen the improvements made in Welsh primary schools, and the flurry of reports of improved academic performance and happier schoolchildren overall. The issue is not only the content of their plates, but the content of their futures. Proper nutrition is vital for maintaining a healthy body and mind. By providing food with true nutritional value in schools, we can ensure that all children, no matter their background, dietary requirements or religious beliefs, receive at least one healthy meal a day. By voting for this motion, we can bridge the gap between disadvantaged and privileged students, ensuring a more equal chance of success for all.

Looking around this room, I see such a variety of cultures and backgrounds. Growing up as a Muslim in the UK, I can remember a few times when I did not receive a fulfilling meal in school. That is unacceptable. Numerous studies have shown a strong correlation between good nutrition and cognitive development. By guaranteeing access to balanced and healthy meals for every student, we can create a more focused and engaged classroom and improve the output of our education system. We are all taught what a healthy and balanced meal looks like—even in primary school, through photos and diagrams. How can we possibly provide meals that do not meet that standard in those very same schools?

If we encourage healthy eating habits at a young age, children are more likely to make healthier decisions in later life. By investing in food quality now, we can reduce the burden on an already struggling healthcare system in the future. As Members have mentioned, one in four year 6 students is obese. I ask you all: how many more before we act?

MYPs, the importance of the quality of food in schools cannot be overlooked. It directly influences the wellbeing of children, the wider economy and the future of this nation. I close the debate by saying this: we are already making progress in Wales. England, the ball is in your court. *[Applause.]*

Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies

Mr Speaker: We will now move on to a very important part of the programme. We will hear from young representatives from the UK's overseas territories and, for the first time, the Crown dependencies. Many of the decisions that we make here in the UK have a huge impact on their future, and they are part of the United Kingdom family, so today I am very pleased to offer them a platform from which they can speak about the most important issues of equality facing young people in their territory. I call the youth representative from Gibraltar.

12.11 pm

Jessie Chipol (Gibraltar): Gibraltar is a nation known for its historical and cultural heritage, without which it would just be a very cool and odd-looking rock on the southern end of the Iberian peninsula. Llanito is a fascinating and unique dialect spoken in our British overseas territory, and we consider it to be our language. It reflects the rich cultural history and diverse heritage of Gibraltar, making it a significant part of our local identity. Llanito is a blend of mainly English and Spanish words, with the occasional unique word that comes from neither of those languages. The mixture of languages has been developed throughout Gibraltar's long history of international trade and migration. However, Llanito is more than just a language for us. It is a symbol of Gibraltar's identity and proof of our Rock's multicultural society, which has been shaped by centuries of historical influences. Llanito has been the language of everyday life for years, and it reflects the shared experiences and values of Gibraltarians.

Regrettably, though, Llanito is becoming forgotten among our youth. The dominance of the English language in Gibraltar alongside educational and cultural factors has led to a decline in the regular use of Llanito. Many young Gibraltarians grow up speaking primarily English, thereby forgetting Llanito. While many might understand the language, they will not speak it. Preserving Llanito is not merely about protecting a language; it is about continuing a piece of Gibraltar's history and culture. Llanito connects the past with the present, fostering a sense of belonging among its speakers.

As Gibraltarians, we must embrace both English and Llanito, preserving our unique language. Community involvement is crucial in the preservation of Llanito. As Gibraltarians, we should take pride in our language and actively use it in our daily lives. Celebrating Llanito cultural events and education can also contribute to its survival. The loss of Llanito is a matter of concern for many Gibraltarians, as it represents not only a unique heritage, but the essence of Gibraltar's identity. Gibraltar remains proudly British. Preserving Llanito is about embracing the rich history that defines Gibraltar. I believe we should appreciate the value of Llanito and commit to its preservation, ensuring that it remains a symbol of Gibraltar's diversity.

Mr Speaker: I call the youth representative from the British Virgin Islands.

Naomi Onwufuju (British Virgin Islands): My name is Naomi Onwufuju, and I proudly represent the Virgin Islands. Today, I stand before you as a senior in high school who is deeply invested in the future of education in my territory. The relevance of education, or the lack thereof, has become a pressing challenge for the youth of our community. As I approach graduation, I cannot help but question how well my years of education have truly prepared me for the world beyond the school walls. This concern resonates with many of my peers, and creates uncertainty about our readiness to face upcoming challenges. Education should be like a compass guiding us through life, but this compass loses its significance if it fails to connect the dots between the theoretical knowledge we acquire in classrooms and its practical application in the real world.

In the Virgin Islands, we have and continue to face our own challenges. For example, we had the hurricanes of 2017, but the main high school only just reopened in January, after five years of half-day sessions at various sites. With full-time sessions now back, gaps in major subjects such as the sciences and mathematics have surfaced, particularly when students transfer to overseas territories, such as the United Kingdom, to study. Many primary schools have suffered the same fate, and some have not reopened. The Ministry of Education, Youth Affairs and Sports has identified and implemented new initiatives to address this problem.

Every student requires a tailored educational journey to thrive. We are all unique, with diverse minds and distinct learning styles. It is essential that our education system acknowledges and accommodates this diversity, creating an environment where each one of us can excel.

Virgin Islands youth want an education system that prioritises relevant and meaningful learning. We need an education system that not only equips us with academic knowledge but instils in us the practical skills and critical thinking abilities essential for navigating the complexities of the world. Thank you, Mr Speaker. *[Applause.]*

Mr Speaker: I call the young representative from Bermuda.

Tayla Imani Bean (Bermuda): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Bermuda national youth policy, implemented in 2021, tackles eight critical issues affecting Bermuda's youth. Goal 3 emphasises the commitment to minimising antisocial behaviour. Unfortunately, this issue is not new, and seems to be escalating. In 2020 alone, over 900 anti-social crimes were committed in Bermuda. That highlights that it is a major problem on the island, and my speech will target the importance of prioritising young people in this discussion.

Mr Speaker, as a young person, I witness antisocial behaviour around me. It is largely influenced by three factors: social media, social standards, and a lack of positive role models. Social media's influence, showcasing and glamorising antisocial lifestyles, pushes peers towards quick wealth through the selling of narcotics, due to a desire for social status. It shifts role models from family or educators to those individuals who are idolised, or seamlessly wealthy peers, and contributes to a relaxed attitude towards social conduct.

For families, especially single-parent households, getting the essentials has become a struggle. The concept of “It takes a village to raise a child” has diminished, and been replaced by a survival-of-the-fittest mentality. When parents work multiple jobs, it leaves little time for quality moments, and causes youth to seek ways to assist their families—often leading to antisocial behaviour for quick income. Efforts to combat antisocial behaviour and gang violence have been made, but the most important stakeholders—the youth—have not been appropriately engaged. We are the eyes and ears that can provide insight into what is occurring among our peers.

Where do we proceed from here? We must begin with our young people. Our approach must address the root causes directly and consider the viewpoints of the youth. In closing, I extend my gratitude to those who have enabled this impactful gathering of young minds. I ask my fellow peers to keep striving for meaningful and positive change. Thank you. [*Applause.*]

Mr Speaker: I call the youth representative from Montserrat.

Hayley-Shai Kassie (Montserrat): Thank you, Mr Speaker. My name is Hayley-Shai Kassie, from Montserrat.

In our world today, as young persons, we cannot help but observe the global atrocities of war, human trafficking, genocide and the looming threat of climate change. Amid these global challenges, there is a silent atrocity that threatens small states, such as Montserrat: the issue of youth inequality.

This raises the question: what specific inequalities are young people facing? Montserrat, Anguilla, the British Virgin Islands and other developing states outside the G20 are entangled in a web of economic disparities, educational inequalities, and limited employment opportunities, necessitating an urgent and resolute response.

Over the years, developing economies have been told to be reliant on Government employment, construction and tourism, while larger countries are financing an AI revolution and newer technologies. As a result, young people of the Caribbean region, including Montserrat, encounter immense difficulty in securing stable and fulfilling job opportunities, often prompting them to leave their beloved countries, causing a cultural genocide of youth losing their way of life.

This migration of educated youth further exacerbates these countries’ inequality, depriving not only Montserrat but countries such as Bermuda, the Cayman Islands, Gibraltar and others of their skilled workforces. Therefore, I implore this honourable gathering, as young people, to push their nations to diversify the development of their economies. The key to this endeavour is education and financing new industries as the cornerstone of youth equality.

To realise a more equitable future for Montserrat, and the youth of the Caribbean, the G20 countries should help to expand our economic horizons by investing in new industries and sectors, moving beyond Government employment and tourism. Agriculture, renewable energy, technology, manufacturing, entrepreneurship, and creative industries hold the potential to revitalise our economies, providing opportunities for all. This vision requires unwavering support from the United Kingdom, the

Commonwealth and other G7 countries to commit investments in quality education and training programmes for Montserrat and other developing regional countries.

If and when that is done correctly, it will empower our people with the skills necessary to grow our economies so that we can stand with the United Kingdom and the rest of the world as self-reliant allies to fix the atrocities of the world today. Youth equality in Montserrat is not an unattainable dream but a palpable goal, achievable through collective determination. Let us unite to diversify our economies and empower youths, and thereby forge a brighter and more equal future for all.

Mr Speaker: I now call the youth representative from Anguilla.

Ethan Harrigan (Anguilla): Thank you, Mr Speaker. My name is Ethan Harrigan and I am representing the beautiful island of Anguilla.

The Anguilla National Youth Policy serves as a guiding framework for the Government to facilitate the engagement of youth as active citizens and co-creators of Anguilla’s economic recovery and sustainable futures. However, we face the common issue of too much sameness within our mindset, causing us to increasingly lose touch with some key principles and traits that need to be practised by upcoming generations in order to solve our unique economic challenges.

Anguilla’s education system adopts an inclusive approach where a child’s path is determined by their capabilities, subject interests and parents’ wishes, which is commendable. However, when youth encounter challenges, they often experience a fear of failure, which can lead to disillusionment, loss of confidence in the system and an increased risk of falling down a negative path. Hence, it is crucial to foster a critical-thinking and growth mindset from primary school and up. Providing that within the education system enables youth to thrive amidst difficulty. It helps to break mental barriers and promotes equality of opportunity, ensuring that all youth can use their unique capabilities to succeed, as they then actually know what it takes.

To encourage positive youth development outside of school, our community and Government provide opportunities and support with initiatives such as the Anguilla Youth Parliament and the Anguilla Youth Business Foundation, which supports youth in their entrepreneurial endeavours. However, to fully harness our youth’s energy and creativity and ensure that youth see and effectively use these opportunities, they need to be taught how to develop the skills of understanding why things are the way that they are, and of defining what actions can be taken to improve any situation—and then acting on that.

Also, importantly, opportunities made for youth must be marketed and presented in ways that align the desires of youth with the betterment of the country. This way, youth will actually believe that using these opportunities will help them achieve the results they desire. We must help all youth practise bravery, adaptability, discipline and critical thinking from young, so they will be ably equipped to grow as they evaluate their current beliefs, determine what their limiting beliefs are, find their positive, truthful path to success, and tackle issues we face in Anguilla. [*Applause.*]

Mr Speaker: I call the representative of the Falkland Islands.

Fatima Uqaili (Falkland Islands): Good morning, Mr Speaker. My name is Fatima Uqaili, and I stand before you today to address a critical issue that affects the wellbeing and future of our young generation in the Falkland Islands: the scarcity and high cost of fresh fruit and vegetables, and its detrimental impact on the young people. Our youth are the future of the islands, and it is our collective responsibility to ensure their wellbeing and a thriving future.

As many of you know, the Falkland Islands face unique challenges due to their remote location and harsh climate. The availability of fresh produce is limited, making it difficult for our young people to access nutritious fruits and vegetables, which are essential for their growth and development. Moreover, the high prices of imported produce pose an additional burden on families, especially those with lower incomes, making it even more challenging to maintain a balanced diet.

The consequences of this scarcity are far-reaching and there could be serious implications for the health and wellbeing of our young population. Insufficient intake of fresh fruits and vegetables can lead to various health issues, including vitamin deficiencies, weakened immune systems and an increased risk of chronic diseases. Furthermore, inadequate nutrition can hinder academic performance and hamper the overall potential of our youth.

To tackle this critical problem, we must take decisive action. One potential solution to make a substantial difference is for the Government to provide subsidies for those who do not have access to a garden, allowing them to grow their own crops. Such a measure would promote self-sufficiency, increase the availability of fresh produce and empower our communities to take charge of their own nutritional needs.

By implementing a subsidised gardening programme, we can encourage residents to cultivate fruits and vegetables in their own homes or community spaces. This initiative not only provides a practical solution to the lack of availability, but imparts valuable life skills to our young people. Gardening fosters a sense of responsibility, patience and pride as individuals witness the fruits of their labour literally grow before their eyes. It connects them to nature and educates them about sustainable practices and the importance of conservation. Furthermore, community gardens can serve as spaces for intergenerational bonding, where elders can share traditional agricultural knowledge with the younger generation. This fosters a sense of unity and strengthens the social fabric of our society, which is essential for the emotional wellbeing of our young people.

Beyond the health and social advantages, a Government-supported gardening programme could have positive economic implications. It could create new job opportunities related to agriculture, provide a source of income for families through selling surplus produce and reduce the financial burden on the healthcare system. Successfully implementing the initiative requires collaboration and support from various stakeholders, including Government bodies, local communities and agricultural experts. Adequate resources must be allocated to train residents in gardening techniques, provide necessary equipment and promote sustainable practices.

In conclusion, the scarcity, difficulty in cultivation, and high cost of fresh fruit and vegetables in the Falkland Islands has a negative impact on our young people. I urge the Government to take the lead and provide subsidies for residents without access to gardens, which will not only promote nutrition but foster essential life skills. We, the islanders, have to pave the way for a healthier, stronger and brighter future for our youth and the Falkland Islands as a whole.

Mr Speaker: Please try to keep to time to help others, because we will not get everybody in if we are not careful. We now come to the youth rep from Saint Helena.

Kelly Yon (Saint Helena): Thank you, Mr Speaker. My name is Kelly and I am from Saint Helena island. Saint Helena is a British overseas territory located in the south Atlantic ocean; it is a small island with a population of 3,987 people.

Equality is about ensuring that every individual has an equal opportunity to make the most of their lives and talents. The most important equality issue facing young people from my territory would be a common consensus of feeling as though they are not heard among the community. Topics of great importance are not talked about and their opportunities are slim to none.

While preparing this speech, I reached out to some of the youth among Saint Helena's community and asked them their opinions on this topic. On hearing their responses, a harsh truth appeared: that "equality seems like a farfetched dream to most of us on St Helena." This has been established by a few key issues, one being that there is a constant cycle of people completing compulsory education and leaving the island for something better, which more recently has seen our population being at an all-time low since January 2010. A lot of young people have said that that is down to the fact that their goal is simply to get off the island to access more equal opportunities.

This sad reality is so apparent that it cannot be ignored. Though these issues are talked about continuously, there is a feeling that young people's voices are not heard. In a time when we are making some of the biggest decisions that could impact our future, there is a feeling of neglect—of no support or guidance to help young people pursue their passions on their home. That is mostly due to Saint Helena's limited economy, high cost of living, and limited housing and resources. However, the major concern for young people specifically is a lack of educational resources, limited teachers and a restrictive curriculum.

Young people are discouraged from pursuing their careers. Take, for example, the number of people recently doing A-levels, which has diminished to only seven in a class of 30 to 40 students. Although our Government have schemes in place to encourage young people's progression, such as Fit for the Future and the new concept of a graduate scheme, young people still struggle when finding a job. From a young person's perspective, you can only move up into a higher position when someone moves out. Saint Helena has an ageing workforce, which might be a reason why.

This issue is even seen when Saint Helenians return home after completing their studies or gaining relevant experience. They come back to a limited availability of jobs, or they are in a position where they are paid less even though they have the same experience and qualifications. We have to question: why are they at a disadvantage? What makes them so different that they do not have equal opportunities?

Another important issue affecting equality and young people is the fact that there are some topics that are not spoken about on Saint Helena, a big one being gender and sexuality. Some young people are not comfortable with expressing their sexuality or try to repress who they are, simply because they are faced with lots of negativity. Unfortunately, Saint Helena's community is stuck in the past on some topics, with views of LGBTQ+ still considered taboo even in today's modern world. This outdated mentality is very discouraging for young people, who are encouraged to express themselves in today's modern world, where diversity and inclusion are highlighted in all their aspects, yet on Saint Helena, this is not the case.

I hope that equality for young people can be achieved on Saint Helena. I hope that access to fast and unlimited internet through our new Equiano cable will open doors to better opportunities. However, equality starts with us young people speaking up, expressing our views and, most importantly, being heard and considered on issues that directly affect us, our island and our people. [*Applause.*]

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Cayman Islands.

Lili Anne Aleria (Cayman Islands): My name is Lili Anne Aleria, and I am here today to represent my beautiful home, the Cayman Islands. Today, I speak on behalf of myself and my peers from my country.

While the Cayman Islands is internationally viewed as affluent, this is not the reality. Following the pandemic years, our island has seen the return of tourists and work permit holders, leading to an increase in people on the island, reduced supply, rising demand and thus escalating prices. Our cost of living is one of the highest in the world, and it is rising every year. An example of this is the price of a resident's groceries. Something as simple as a carton of milk costs £6.44, in comparison to a carton here, which costs £2.30. A loaf of bread costs £7.59, while it is only 75p here. With the rising prices of daily necessities such as food, we are no longer able to obtain the same opportunities that previous generations of Caymanians had: we are no longer able to afford homes or land, to attend private schools or even to qualify for mortgages. Development in the Cayman Islands is a bus driving too fast for Caymanians to catch up to. We, the youth of my island, are motivated to move elsewhere to find openings in other countries' economies just to have a stable life.

Speaking of equality, data from the Cayman Islands labour force survey report of 2023 shows that expatriates now make up 53.5% of the population, while Caymanians account for only 46.5%. In the Cayman Islands, Caymanians are the minority. Is it worth it for the youth of the Cayman Islands to be motivated to move away from home when it will just be replaced by apartments that we, as young Caymanians, cannot afford? We need to create an island that accommodates the youth of the Cayman Islands, an island where we can receive an education that can lead us to sufficient paying jobs to

buy a house or land where we can plant our roots. An issue of equality facing the youth today is our lack of prospects to call the Cayman Islands—the islands that we hold dear to our hearts—our home.

Mr Speaker: I now call the youth representative from the Turks and Caicos Islands.

Chelsea Been (Turks and Caicos): I am Chelsea Been, the representative for the Turks and Caicos Islands, a chain of islands and cays located on the most southern end of the Bahamian archipelago in the Atlantic ocean.

Among the most important equality issues that youth from my territory face is an emerging issue relating to the discontinuation of the British Girlguiding Overseas programme. The consequences are yet to be seen, but first and foremost it breaks up the global family of girlguiding as we know it. Girlguiding in the Turks and Caicos Islands is a cornerstone organisation that has survived decades of change but remains a constant avenue to mould well rounded, civic-minded females who have a sense of community and feel compelled to brighten their little corner of the world.

Girlguiding in the TCI started in 1932 on Salt Cay, an island with an area of 2.5 square miles. I am a part of the 8th Girlguiding Company, started by the Anglican Church in Grand Turk. Grand Turk is 7.5 square miles in area. My grandmother, now deceased, was a girl guide. My aunt was a commissioner of girl guides. I am proud of this tradition, passed down to me. I have been a girl guide since I was four years old, starting as a rainbow and then becoming a Brownie guide and then a girl guide. I planned to continue on this path. However, the covid-19 pandemic and its restrictions cheated me out of what could have been an uninterrupted span of service to ranger status.

The UK Girlguiding board of trustees' decision to end British Girlguiding Overseas operations as of 1 September 2023 can be seen as borderline discriminatory and an exclusionist policy. It will hurt the growth of girlguiding in the TCI and perhaps elsewhere. The decision is tantamount to cutting off the life source. Girlguiding in the overseas territories has its roots in UK girlguiding. A tree without solid roots will die. Although girlguiding no doubt can and will continue in the TCI, the support, stability and consistency afforded by having one root system in BGO served as an anchor to girlguiding between and among 36 countries and territories.

The girl guide traditions, shared values and embedded behaviours formed a uniform girlguiding culture and fostered cohesion and engagement. Despite diversity, the oneness of the girl guide law is a true source of our bond. I implore the UK Girlguiding board of trustees to reconsider this decision, so that we can continue to reap the benefits of global outreach, influence, diversity, a strong sense of belonging, support, fun and lifelong friendships. All can be achieved as we tackle the crucial issues of climate change and the environment and education, especially equitable access for children with special needs.

Mr Speaker: Well done. I now call the youth representative from Guernsey.

Neave Chatting-Tonks (Guernsey): Good afternoon. My name is Neave Chatting-Tonks and I am 16 years old and from Guernsey, in the Channel Islands. I will be discussing the important issues of equality facing young

people on my island today. I would like to thank all Members for inviting me to this amazing opportunity today in the House of Commons.

The first point that I wish to cover is equality in the education sector and a hot topic that has been around for decades—bullying. According to the most up-to-date young people’s survey in Guernsey, bullying increased by 10% from 2019 to 2022. To put that in perspective, that is one in three secondary school-aged pupils who reported that they have been bullied at or near school in the last 12 months. As bullying can be constant, this will have a severe impact on mental health, as not having enough specialised teachers in schools makes students feel unsupported on a day-to-day basis.

To face this problem, the Youth Forum, of which I am Chair, worked on creating a pledge that stands for not being a bystander in the face of discrimination. This was incorporated in all high schools across Guernsey. It was shown with a badge and a sign of the pledge to champion anti-discrimination. We also reviewed the anti-bullying policies in all schools to keep them consistent.

Lastly, I would like to discuss the importance of youth voice. With an ageing population in Guernsey, young people feel disregarded, and our voices are not heard. Many young people do not feel the need to put their vote forward, as demonstrated in the recent statistics on who signed up to the electoral roll in 2022. This showed that only 4% of the total number of young people entitled to vote, aged 16 to 19, signed up. It is saddening to see that future generations are not signing up to vote, as the people we are voting for are responsible for making important decisions in Guernsey. To tackle this, we are creating a youth manifesto to make sure that what the youth want is considered. We are the next generation. Thank you for listening.

Mr Speaker: I now call the youth representative from Jersey.

Daniel Riley (Jersey): It is an honour to be the first person to speak on behalf of Jersey in this Chamber.

Economic inequality is the most important issue of equality facing young people in Jersey today. Jersey ranks as one of the 50 worst jurisdictions worldwide for wealth inequality, as measured by the Gini index. The impact of this inequality on young people is massive. It affects their education, their career prospects and even whether they can continue to live in Jersey. The most significant way in which Jersey’s economic inequality affects young people is the substantial cost of living and especially the cost of housing. Even the least expensive market-rate flats have rents in excess of £1,000 a month, far above what many newly graduated young people can afford. The cost of housing is therefore a significant roadblock to young people remaining to live in Jersey after completing their education.

Less advantaged young people also cannot afford to attend the island’s fee-paying schools. Jersey has a prevalent old boys’ club culture in industry, meaning that young people attending state schools are often less likely to be successful in future job applications than those who attended the “right” school.

These factors compound to mean that young people in Jersey who are less economically advantaged are effectively forced out of the island when they turn 18. If

not addressed, these issues risk creating an island of the rich, where the only young people who remain are those who can afford to do so.

Mr Speaker: I now call the youth representative for the Isle of Man.

Anna Ridgeway (Isle of Man): In 1997, the then Labour Government set out their priorities before this House as “education, education, education”. Since then, significant resources have been put into ensuring equality of access to higher education through widening participation programmes and financial aid. Sadly, 25 years later, there is still an inequality across the British Isles, with each jurisdiction choosing to do things differently. To coin a phrase from the healthcare setting, higher education provision has become a postcode lottery.

Widening participation programmes run by universities and third-sector bodies, such as the Sutton Trust, have been instrumental in ensuring that a place at university can now be seen as a right of the many, not just the privileged few. However, students from the Isle of Man, which is outside the jurisdiction of the United Kingdom, cannot benefit from such initiatives. The Isle of Man Government are not part of Acorn or the participation of local area categories—POLAR4 and POLAR5—which fails to put Manx students on an equal footing in the provision of sufficient contextual data. The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service now offers reference writers a small context box, but this will never be a replacement for raw data, especially FSM6 data.

Another key issue for Manx students is the financial burden of higher education, especially due to additional travel costs. These costs are not considered by UK universities, and some students have to pay for five separate trips to interviews, with many institutions still refusing to move to online interviews. Furthermore, while the Manx Government offer tuition fee grants, we cannot access low-interest student loans, meaning that the cost of living and accommodation are difficult to afford.

Therefore, I urge the British Government to liaise with their Crown dependencies so that equality of widening participation and financial provision can be reached, especially during a cost of living crisis. If we seek to reduce inequality, we must reprioritise education.

Mr Speaker: That concludes this morning’s sitting. The Youth Parliament will adjourn until 1.40 pm. After some official photographs in the Chamber, I will invite you all to return to Westminster Hall for lunch.

May I say how inspirational you have all been? It is fantastic to know that the future of democracy is safe. Here we will have future MPs and—who knows?—a Speaker or Prime Minister. You are wonderful. Don’t give up on democracy, because you will shape the future. I am not the future—you are—so please carry on in the inspirational way that you have shown this morning. I am so proud of what you are doing; it really is good.

I will just say a quick thank you to the Clerks, the Doorkeepers and everybody who has made this event happen once again. You will not see me this afternoon—my deputy is taking over—so I want to say a big thank you, and I hope to see some of you next year.

12.46 pm

Sitting suspended.

Standardisation

[DAME ROSIE WINTERTON *in the Chair*]

1.39 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Welcome back to the 13th sitting of the UK Youth Parliament in the House of Commons Chamber. I am one of the Deputy Speakers of the House of Commons, and I am delighted to be chairing your debates this afternoon. This morning, we heard brilliant speeches on holiday hunger and quality of food. I thank the Leader of the House, Penny Mordaunt; the shadow Minister for Arts, Heritage and Civil Society, Lilian Greenwood; and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Stuart Andrew, for their encouraging words.

This afternoon, you will debate standardisation, financing and funding, and additional pricing. I look forward to hearing your contributions. I know that you are confined to one-minute speeches. If you all stick to that, we should be able to get as many people as possible to speak in the debate—that is my plea to you, as Deputy Speaker. At about 3.15 pm, you will vote on which of the five subjects debated today should be the Youth Parliament's priority focus for the remainder of the Food for Learning campaign.

The Youth Parliament will now consider the third motion of the day, on standardisation. The full motion is printed on the Order Paper. I call the Member of the Youth Parliament from Hammersmith and Fulham to move the motion.

Anastasia Odusanwo (London): The motion is,

That this House believes there is a lack of consistency across the UK on the quantity and quality of food provided in free school meals; calls on the Government to update guidance on the standard and quality of free school meals; and further believes that this updated guidance should address the quality of food, the amount of food available throughout the day, catering for different dietary requirements including religious and cultural needs, and the use of ethically sourced ingredients.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Let me paint you a picture: one young person on free school meals has a range of nutritious options, while another is stuck with a poor-quality meal; a child could afford a school meal just last year, but circumstances have changed and now they cannot have one. Those young people are subject to decisions about their meals made by wealthy politicians—a lack of equality, a lack of consideration, a lack of standardisation.

An article in *The Guardian* mentions a teenager in this country, and her father, who are

“textbook survivors of poverty and food insecurity.”

Her dad is a single parent with a long-term health condition who cannot work and is on universal credit. Despite that, she has been told that she cannot access free school meals. It is disheartening to know that it is a similar story for 1.7 million young people in the UK. Standardisation would increase the threshold and ensure that everyone who needs support receives it. No one should be left out.

However, it does not stop there. Even those who are on free school meals find their options limited, their dietary choices restricted, and their cultural or religious

requirements ignored. How can we claim to offer equal opportunities when a student's access to a meal is dictated by geography? Every single child on free school meals deserves to have a nutritious lunch that caters to their needs. The fact that that can change depending on where in the UK a child is born is a terrifying reality. Standardising free school meals is not only about levelling the playing field, but about giving every child an equal chance to succeed and rejecting the idea that where a child lives should truncate their freedom of choice.

What happens when standardisation is implemented? Do we allow those in authority to act without our say? Time and again, we are left out of conversations, excluded from the room and do not have a seat at the table. Decisions that affect us are made without us, so are they really for us? We cannot afford to repeat this cycle with free school meals. Standardisation calls for young people to be members of stakeholder working groups that adapt, oversee and monitor the guidelines. The objective is to ensure that young people have a say on a matter that directly affects their daily lives.

Let us paint a better picture. Voting for this motion will mean that every young person on free school meals has a range of nutritious options, that every young person who cannot afford a meal is offered one free, and that every young person is at the forefront of decisions that affect their access to free school meals—more equality, more consideration, more standardisation. *[Applause.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Member of the Youth Parliament from South Tyneside to second the motion.

Luke Hall (North East): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Picture this. It is Friday lunch time. I have just sat down with all my friends in the school café, after a full morning of rigorous and challenging lessons. Jokes are being told, stories are being shared. I am ready to enjoy my complete, full and delicious school meal. But so many young people who are receiving free school meal support are not allowed that experience; in so many other schools, that is not the reality. Devastatingly, disparities between counties, regions and even schools mean that a complete free school meal does not look the same for all young people. To solve this great injustice, we must recognise that there is difference, and that that difference means some young people are more disadvantaged than others at lunch time.

One young person receiving free school meals even said, “If I lived somewhere else, I would just get more food.” That is exactly what standardisation looks to address. If we are to implement better free school meal support, we must ensure that the support that everyone receives is of the same quality and standard. I should not have to address this. Everyone would agree that there should be a consistent and enjoyable standard of school food, no matter where it is served. We must recognise that inequality between school cafés is real and something that we must tackle head on.

Working with affected students, catering outlets and Governments will ensure that the plan to ensure that every child is supported equally and equitably works. It is the only way to improve the system, which right now does not serve all young people in the right way. It is also important to consider the benefits. Young people

who receive a quality meal that properly suits their needs perform better in school, attend more frequently, and overall have better mental health and wellbeing. If we do this right, I envision a reality where all young people can say that they are happy that they are being served the same quality and quantity of food as anyone anywhere else in the UK. It is so important that we make standardisation a priority, because everybody should have their needs supported, no matter where they live. *[Applause]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The general debate is now open.

Omar Taher (Scotland): My name is Omar. I represent West Scotland, and I am wearing a grey blazer and blue trousers.

Singer and songwriter Rihanna once said, “Shine bright like a diamond.” The UK is seen as a model for the rest of the world to follow and is admired for its openness and commitment to helping those in need, yet it amazes me how many people in the UK of all places are denied their essential human rights due to their identity. I would be humiliated if I had to seek help with my human right to access food, but that is the devastating and harsh reality for many of our young people. The Scottish Youth Parliament’s “Right to Food” report showed that nearly half of young people believe there is a stigma involved with seeking help. How can we live in a society that condones that?

MYPs, look at me and you will see the keffiyeh around my neck, symbolising resilience and strength. It is culturally native to the people of the middle east, including Syria, my home country. People like me have been forced to flee our home countries, and were promised that we would be looked after here, yet we are restricted from accessing our fundamental right.

Now I look at you and I see amazing and wonderful people across the room, like my friend Zainab, a strong and fierce woman full of potential to become an MP in the future. As a British Syrian Muslim, I ask this: how can we fulfil our roles if we are discriminated against and prevented from being healthy and nourished? The UK has ratified the United Nations convention on the rights of the child, and article 4 states that richer countries should help poorer countries to provide nourishment to young people. How can we support others when we are failing our own?

If our food system is built on the notion that not everyone has an equal right to nutritious food, people will continue to face discrimination, starve and die. We cannot allow that to happen. We must standardise food and eliminate inequality. We need that to be our priority, and we need to be the voice of the young people we were chosen to represent. Let us do our jobs, restore faith in humanity and be the image of our young people. If we do not, why are we even here?

Madi Faulkner-Hatt (East of England): My name is Madi Faulkner-Hatt and I am the Member of the Youth Parliament for Southend-on-Sea. In Southend, 48.8% of young people in secondary school do not claim the free schools meals that they are eligible for. For some it is because they do not know. In other areas of the UK, an automatic enrolment system will be put in place. That solution needs to be standardised and

offered to everyone. In my area, some schools charge for the container the food is put in. That means that every single time a young person gets a free school meal, they are put into their overdraft and into debt with the school. That is completely unfair to those who cannot afford it. Home-schooled young people in our area also have no access to free school meals.

This means that all year round, those who cannot afford food are struggling with hunger and starvation. Food prices are increasing while free school meal prices are stagnating and their sizes are decreasing. That means that young people are getting so much less with their free school meals than they were before. We need a standardised free school meal to ensure that every single young person gets a whole and hearty meal for their money. Last year, we talked about how the education system was failing so many young people. Why are we setting up so many young people to fail with unstandardised free school meals?

Tom Penketh (North West): I am Tom Penketh, MYP for Oldham, the former constituency of Winston Churchill.

Although standardisation would help, I think additional pricing should be the main focus, because with input from all four nations it would result in the best outcome for all young people. Paired with an annual review, it would hopefully always be the best it can. It would relieve pressure on families who are disadvantaged, as they would know their children would have access to food outside of their main meal, such as breakfast, the most important meal of the day. Also, support with budgeting for food outside of school would help young people to be aware of how to spend less money for more food. I know that that would help the young people in Oldham, and I urge Members to support additional pricing.

Amelia Clark-Allan (Yorkshire and Humber): My name is Amelia Clark-Allan, Member of the Youth Parliament and member of Doncaster Youth Council.

It is no secret that the cost of living crisis is affecting children and young people. In Doncaster alone, one in three children lives in poverty. According to Action for Children, there are 4.2 million children in poverty in the UK. Prioritising standardisation would allow us to ensure that all students have access to a healthy, balanced meal, promoting a healthy relationship with food and addressing the epidemic of childhood obesity. As well as teaching us what a healthy, nutritious meal looks like, it would allow us to promote healthy lifestyle choices and reduce health risks later in life. Many may not get that education at home, but it is education we need.

Many leaders have suggested that education is the way out of poverty, but how can that happen if not everyone is given the same chance? Food plays a significant role in learning and education, and we know the benefits that a full nutritious meal has on our health and wellbeing. Food nourishes our minds. It is an investment in our future and helps us to reach our full potential. The life chances of children and young people who are hungry at school are therefore harmed.

We need a call to action. I say to everyone here today: we must set the same standard for free school meals for all children and young people across the UK. We need

to close the attainment gaps. All children and young people deserve the same opportunity to succeed. Please invest in our presents and our futures.

Carys-Megan James (Wales): My name is Carys-Megan James and I am the MYP for Rhondda Cynon Taf. I have brown hair and I am wearing a dark striped blazer.

For many young people, school lunch is the only hot meal that they have access to each day; it is their only source of energy to get them through their daily activities. The current cost of living crisis is only making this problem worse. Yet why do we always hear that school meals are not good enough? I am sure most of us have been told by the young people in our constituencies that school meals are too unhealthy and too expensive, and that there are not enough options for everybody's dietary and religious needs.

By calling on the Government to standardise free school meal provision and quality, we can take one step closer to solving this issue and ensure that fewer of our classmates and friends, and the people we stand here today to represent, go hungry. Don't let that one meal be a postcode lottery.

Ayah Mamode (London): I am Ayah, and I represent Kensington and Chelsea in London. Members of Youth Parliament, a pressing issue sits in the stomach of millions of children today: we need to step up and tackle food poverty in the current cost of living crisis. Shamefully, underprivileged children are those most affected by the increase in food poverty. Is anyone beyond them aware of this? Our leaders constantly emphasise the importance of core subjects like maths, so why don't we let them do the maths? More than 4 million children in the UK are living in poverty, but less than 2 million are claiming free school meals. That equals more than 2 million children left helpless. Raising just one child in the UK requires an average annual income of £11,300, but being eligible for free school meals requires less than £7,400. Are these figures adding up? No? Well, clearly someone is not doing their maths.

This only calls attention to the need for action and for investment in the next generation. By failing to act, we only do damage. Listen, learn, lead—these are three things that people cannot do on a deficient diet. By failing to provide standardised meals to those who need them most, we leave them helpless. There can be no argument; implementing standardised, high-quality free school meals is essential. At-risk children receive the bare minimum, which is all too often inconsistent and unreliable; there is no regular availability of food, and children's needs are not catered to.

We cannot put our country's future at a disadvantage because we are divided. Let us not allow partisan divisions to starve British youth of a future, for if we forget the value of food for the next generation, we have failed ourselves as much as we have failed them. This epidemic is eating away at our society.

Madam Deputy Speaker: In order to help Members, I will stand up when I think they are running over, to allow as many of you in as possible.

George McBride (South East): Hi everyone. My name is George McBride, and I am the Member of Youth Parliament for Bracknell Forest. Since the covid pandemic, food insecurity has only got worse in schools. Eating in

school should be a pleasurable experience. A standardised school diet would help children develop healthy eating patterns and ensure they received the nutrition and energy required for a healthy school environment. It is important to provide a wide variety of foods across the week, using fresh, sustainable and locally sourced ingredients. It is vital that food provided by schools includes the correct nutrients to combat childhood obesity and enhance productivity, while remaining appealing and filling.

With the cost of living on the rise, so is food insecurity. A YouGov survey found that 17% of UK households were food-insecure, up from only 7.4% in January 2021. Having a school uniform has been shown to increase academic performance due to the reduced pressure to conform to fashion trends. I believe this principle can be applied to a standardised school diet. Reducing food insecurity through the improved overall quality and quantity of consistent, nutritious food will have a positive impact on children's education, and on those who are entitled to free school meals, so join me in prioritising this motion.

Laura Domian (West Midlands): I am Laura, and I am from Staffordshire. I will talk about standardisation. Food should be a public good, not a rival or excludable one. No matter how rich or poor, how privileged or disadvantaged, or able or unable to provide for themselves, everyone should be provided with a good standard of nutritious food that makes us happy and healthy. It should not be just good enough.

There are too many young people and children in schools and homes eating food that is simply below normal standards, and it is provided by rather entitled people who think that a 40p can of bland, preserved, non-nutritious food can end food insecurity if put into a food bank. That is simply not good enough. We need the Government to step in and provide free school meals that are standardised and healthy, and provide food for people in holidays and at home.

Layan Hassan (North West): Today, I bring before you a matter of the utmost urgency and moral imperative: the standardisation of access to sustenance for our nation's youth. It is a call and demand for action, a rallying cry for equality and a demand for justice. A report by the Children's Society highlighted that young people in families struggling with food are more likely to experience poor mental health, including feelings of shame and embarrassment. In the diverse view of our society, we witness a painful truth: not all young people are offered the same opportunity to thrive. While some are blessed with an abundance of nourishment, others are condemned to the cruel chains of hunger and deprivation.

Standardisation is about demolishing barriers and eradicating the shackles of disadvantage that no young person should be put in. Investing in standardised access is the way to go forward, and to fuel the next generation of well-fed, vibrant youth. It is the engine of progress and the architect of innovation for future power, resilience and success.

Adele Leung (South West): Hello everyone. I am Adele, the Member of Youth Parliament for Cheltenham and Tewksbury.

MYPs, I have one thing to say to you: we have an agenda today, but what we need is a plan. Food poverty will not be corrected by conscience, and hungry children cannot be fed by virtue, rhetoric or good will. Parliament is the elected assembly where we can convert intention into action, with a concrete, structured plan. What will hinder our goal of introducing our policy of free school meals for all is the budget. We need funding to standardise free school meals in the UK; that is how we will turn our anger and fury into fuel.

If we are not able to introduce a concrete plan, our fight for free school meals will falter as the Government falters; our power will falter as their power falters. MYPs, you are compassionate, upstanding people, and you know what you want, but if we are to achieve our goals today, you need to vote for finance and funding, because that is how we will get the most deprived areas of the UK funded, so that the children who are most deprived, at the ground level of poverty and social inequity, can get the meals they need. To get quality free school meals and standardisation, you need to vote for finance and funding.

Harrison Kessell (South East): My name is Harrison Kessell, and I am MYP for Kent. The disparity in meal quality and availability across regions is unacceptable. Every child, irrespective of their postcode, deserves equal access to nutritious meals that support their educational journey. By standardising high-quality meals, we ensure fairness and equity in our educational system. This is not just about food; it is about providing every child with a foundation for success. By voting for standardisation, you are also voting for equality.

Michal Pietrzak (East Midlands): Hello. My name is Michal Pietrzak, and I am the Member of Youth Parliament for Leicestershire. Leicester is one of the most diverse places in Europe. We have Hindus, Christians and secular communities living side by side with many other ethnic groups, so it is unacceptable that school meals do not respect the variety of dietary requirements of people of different faiths and beliefs. It is equally appalling that some schools do not label their food, respecting the health and safety of their students with allergies. I am not here to advocate for all schools serving the same thing, day after day, but there should be increased guidance on what type of food they should serve, because I want young people in every school to be able to enjoy a warm, nutritious meal.

Abbie Thomas (Yorkshire and Humber): I am Abbie Thomas, representing Barnsley. Making sure that all children have equal and fair access to a good-quality school meal should be prioritised. Consistent guidelines and standards should be introduced on the types of food offered, portion sizes and nutritional content. By doing that, schools can minimise the use of processed foods, added sugar and unhealthy fats, and focus on providing meals that are beneficial for students.

By setting standards for the nutritional quality of school meals, schools can ensure students get the essential nutrients that they need to stay focused and ready to learn, so let us advocate for standardised school meals that prioritise good nutrition, minimise processed foods, and ensure every student has access to healthy and delicious meals. Together, we can make a positive impact on the wellbeing and success of students.

Mohammad Rizvi (London): I am the MYP for Hounslow, west London, and my name is Mohammad. Young people who are enrolled for free school meals should not have to deal with varying amounts of food. Schools across the UK that provide free meals have different quantities for each person, but is that right? Should getting a sufficient amount in meals really depend on where you live? It is also proven that without enough nutrition, pupils can lose concentration. That is just not right; no person should feel that they have received any less. Not only does that not help them in their day-to-day life, but it can make them fall into the trap of depression.

What we want is simple: a formal manifesto commitment from our political leaders, to show that they are really worth their votes. Democracy comes to life only with eager participation. Despite the differences we have in this House, we all stand for unity. Constituents from my region and yours are watching today to get answers to their questions, and we are here to speak for people who deserve their rights. We are here to speak up for the voiceless.

Thomas Williams (East of England): I am Thomas, an MYP from Essex, in the East of England. A postcode and geography—are they really what defines whether young people get a good, hearty meal in schools? The quality, quantity and nutritional content of young people's food should not be based on the borders of their borough, town or city. Where young people live should not determine the price of a young person's meal. The borough, town, village or city should not define whether they can afford an increase in the price of school meals. We must ensure that all food provided can sustain young people and enable them to follow their personal and academic dreams. Young people's food in Nottingham should not be more expensive than young people's food in Scotland. Young people in Birmingham should be able to access the same high quality and quantity of food as people in Essex. Young people having meals of the same quantity, quality and nutritional benefit is so important, so that we can ensure that all young people, regardless of their starting point, have the highest chance of achieving their potential.

Sukhpreet Kaur Thind (South East): My name is Sukhpreet, and I am an MYP for Kent. Fellow MYPs, envision a future where every child in the UK has equal access to nutritious meals at school. That vision is at the heart of standardising free school meals. Let us consider this: in 2022, 26% of UK households with children were grappling with food insecurity. Standardising free school meals is a direct response to that crisis. It would ensure that every child receives the same quality and volume of food, irrespective of their socioeconomic background. This standardisation is not just a moral imperative; it is a practical solution to a widespread challenge. By providing consistent healthy meals to all students, we are taking a significant step towards addressing nutritional inequalities and setting up our future generations for success. In conclusion, standardising free school meals is a powerful tool in our fight against child hunger and inequality. It is an investment in a fairer, healthier and happier future for all children.

Angela Howson (North East): Hi, my name is Angela Howson and I am the MYP representing Sunderland. In the north of England, we hear a lot of talk about

levelling up, but the disparity between the north and the south is really evident. I have friends in the south, and I hear about the kind of food they are getting. It is completely different from what we get in the north, and that is unacceptable. My school, in Durham, offers a free breakfast every day, with many options, whereas at my old school in Sunderland, we got no free breakfast and no options, even though Sunderland and the north-east have the highest rate of eligibility for free school meals, at nearly 30%. The quality of food is different not only in different schools and areas, but for different people in the same school; there are different options depending on dietary requirements or beliefs. That is unacceptable and it must change for the better. It can be changed with guidance that shrinks this inequality. The standardisation issue also applies to many other areas, and I urge you to vote for it.

Freya Edwards (Yorkshire and Humber): I would like to begin with the definition of malnourished. It means less than the minimum or an unbalanced amount of nutrients or foods essential to sound health and growth. Simply putting food on a plate is not enough. We need to ensure that it provides the correct nutrients otherwise we will have failed to fulfil our aim. These children will still be malnourished. We cannot expect these children to engage in their lessons, to excel in their exams and to take the most from their school day on an empty stomach. Therefore, it falls to us, fellow MYPs, to make sure that we prioritise this when creating the Bill. We need to ensure that these children are fed—properly fed. This is quite possibly their only meal of the day, so it is imperative that it is a healthy, fulfilling one, and that has to be the standard everywhere. Therefore I urge you to join me in making standardisation, significantly in the quality of food, a priority campaign for our Bill.

Oliver Probert-Hill (North West): I am Ollie, one of the Members of the Youth Parliament for Cheshire East in the North West.

I urge you not to vote for this debate topic. Instead, vote for finance and funding. I believe that no child should have to sit in a classroom and feel hungry. That is why I back universal free school meals. Some say that the Government do not have the funds to do that, but, respectfully, I think that that is rubbish. The Government wasted £12 billion on personal protective equipment during the pandemic. If they can afford to be so careless with such a huge sum of money, then they can afford to feed the nation's children.

Politicians shout about equality of opportunity, yet they do not want to give the poorest in our society the opportunity to eat. Remember it would cost only £1 billion a year to provide universal free school meals. That might sound a lot, but it is less than 10% of what the

Government wasted on PPE, as I have already mentioned. The only way to end classroom hunger is through universal free school meals.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Member of the Youth Parliament from Rotherham to conclude the debate.

Curtis Yip (Yorkshire and Humber): At the heart of this debate is a very simple question: should geography determine a child's right to a healthy, nutritious school meal. We know full well that having the right food and adequate nutrition can really impact a child's education. We know that with the academisation of schools across the country, it has caused an inconsistency in the access of provision, quality and volume of food. It came as no surprise when a witness at the Youth Select Committee said that children are surviving, not thriving. With a third of school-age children living in poverty not meeting the requirement to receive free school meals, it is clear that this provision is no longer fulfilling its intended purpose: to leave no child disadvantaged at lunch time.

At this moment in time, there is no national guidance on the standard and quality of meals provided in our schools. What we have seen, therefore, is an exacerbation of food insecurity, a lack of regular access to enough safe, healthy and nutritious food. With 39% of food insecure households said to be in employment, there is a clear gap between those who experience food insecurity and the number of children receiving free school meals. A child in the north should receive no less than a child in the south. It is this gap that speaks for a necessary increase of free school meals in compulsory education.

Standardisation is a very simple solution to ensure that children receive the correct nourishment and that, just as no child should starve of access to a free education, no child should be left starving at school. Let us think about all of this country's greatest achievements—many of us, I think, would reflect on the national health service and the welfare state. I assume that, when these ideas were first introduced, they came with heavy criticism and opposition, but they are now the most proud and cherished embodiments of our beliefs and we all admire them. The same applies to access to free school meals for all children who need it. I hope that that, too, can be added to that real list of achievements, because to be or not to be is most certainly not the question that we are asking ourselves today. It is to be creative, to represent and to provide a public service to those who are most in need. That is what I hope we will all have in mind when we vote in the Division Lobby this afternoon. We are in a cost of living crisis. We must not let the cost of our greed and inaction be that which denies a child the right to a healthy, nutritious school meal. With this, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am hopeful that all the Members of the Youth Parliament in this Chamber today will have the good grace and courtesy to join me commending this motion to the House. *[Applause.]*

Financing and Funding

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

The Youth Parliament will now consider the fourth motion of the day: financing and funding. The full motion is printed on the Order Paper. I call the youth representative from the overseas territories to move the motion.

2.15 pm

Emily Moir (Gibraltar): The motion is,

That this House calls on the Government and local governments to create a ring-fenced budget to ensure that quality free school meals are available to all; and believes that every young person affected by food poverty should have consistent, equal and equitable access to nutritious, ethical and healthy food in all education settings, wherever they are in the UK.

Without the correct finance and funding, the other four chapters in this campaign simply cannot be fulfilled long-term. That is why a ringfenced budget is needed to ensure that quality free school meals are available to all. Otherwise, the campaign is vulnerable to future economic pressures on the Government. You having a free school meal should not be dependent on that. Having food is your right.

Holiday hunger, quality, and standardisation are absolutely key to this campaign, but they will only be facilitated with the appropriate and secured finance and funding. It costs the Government just £2.41 to give a child a free school meal, and this cost does not just provide a child with a meal. It provides them with national standards of nutrition. It provides them with a food-positive environment. It provides them with a platform for social interaction and development. Can you put a cost on the future prospects of a child? No. But if you had to, it is only £2.41, and that is less than a high-street coffee. Having spent my entire education overseas with the armed forces, I look forward to this initiative being adopted by MOD schools so that armed forces children can benefit from this as if they were in the UK.

In conclusion, to go against Jessie J, it is about the “money, money, money.” I urge you to remember that finance and funding is the foundation of free school meals; it underpins and enables the other chapters, and therefore must be voted as the priority. Thank you.

Hardik Singh (West Midlands): Let us consider this fundamental question: can we really put a price on children’s meals and health? I ask this because 23.8% of all pupils, which is equivalent to 2 million people, are on free school meals. Frankly, that figure in and of itself is more than enough to support this chapter. For some of these pupils, the free school meal that they receive may be their only one of the day. The stark reality is that these meals are lacking the right nutrients—a proper balance of protein, carbohydrates, vitamins, and so on—and so detrimental effects are being placed on the children’s health and academic performances.

Providing nutritious meals is not only essential for their wellbeing, but it is also crucial for their ability to focus and succeed in school. Let us not forget that these nutritional supplements are impossible to achieve without funding. We must invest in the futures of these children.

It has been found that, on average, pupils eligible for free school meals have much lower GCSE attainment than those who are not on free school meals. In 2022, a mere 47% of eligible pupils achieved a standard pass in both English and maths, compared to 75% pupils not eligible. This was an attainment gap of around 28 percentage points. This huge gap just goes to show that, for lots of these children on free school meals, their future may be much less successful than the children not on free school meals.

Closing this attainment gap is not only important for the individuals’ success but also for creating a more equitable education system that provides equal opportunities for all students regardless of their economic background, where they grow up, and how they grow up. In terms of regulation of the funding, periodic assessments must be carried out in order to ensure that funding is meeting the needs of students across the nation. Given the current unstable economic state of the UK, it is also essential that emergency assessments are called if in necessary during a time of crisis or when expecting change.

In closing, I urge us all to recognise that investing in the wellbeing and education of our children is the best investment that a society can obtain for the future. Let us measure this by not just numbers or statistics, but the limitless potential that each child holds within. Let us pledge to ensure that every child gets the nourishment and support they need to thrive, not just survive. Without the finance and funding, other motions, such as holiday hunger and quality of food. Etc. may remain just catchy phrases, and we will suffer a significant step back. Finally, I urge us all to take this chapter beyond seriously and give it the utmost consideration that it truly deserves.

Darcey Fawcus (Yorkshire and Humber): My name is Darcey Fawcus, and I am from Doncaster. It is clear to me that we must introduce a universal free school meals scheme with high-quality, nutritious meals for children and young people in education. We know that different parts of the UK operate wildly different policies and eligibility for free meals. The scientific evidence is clear: children who are hungry perform poorly at school. Concentration and activity levels are affected by hunger, and therefore so is educational attainment.

Food nourishes our minds. It is an investment in our future and helps us to reach our full potential. We know that free dinners are a safety net for many children and young people. We need to be taught and shown what a healthy, nutritious meal is to promote healthy lifestyle choices and reduce health risks later in life. For many, they may not get that education at home. That is the education that we need—not to mention how to use a knife and fork. The recent study by the Institute for Fiscal Studies in March 2023 evidenced that the cost of providing free school meals would be repaid by an increase in economic activity and improvements in childhood healthcare, which will result in healthier adults in the years to come and a reduction to the cost of the NHS.

Harley Smith (North West): I am Harley Smith. I am one of the MYPs for Salford. I want to look at every single one of you in the room and ask you this question: why did you run for this role? Was it not to represent the people of your area? Was it to help out the people of

this country as a whole? I want to ask you all another question: haven't we done enough planning and preparing? We cannot put our plans in action because we do not have the money. But if we are given the money or we make plans to get this money and get that money, we can put these plans into action. It is as simple as that.

I have one more thing to say and one more thing to ask all of you: how much of a price are you putting on a child's wellbeing? To me, at least, that is something that is priceless. Quite frankly, the fact that people are even considering allowing children to go hungry is inhumane and disgusting. I say to you all again: how much are you willing to put on a child's wellbeing?

Mia Arthur (London): My name is Mia Arthur, and I am the MYP for the London Borough of Hackney. As for financing and funding, I believe that this is the most important proposition of the campaign that we should focus on. If we can do it, we need to ensure that it does not come at the cost of extra taxes, unsustainable funding and cuts to other sectors of the education sector. All these things will put people across the country in a worse position than they are already in, which is unacceptable. However, if we start to become more creative and look at getting our funding through merging with free school meals, it could result in budgets being saved elsewhere in terms of universal credit and other sectors.

London hosts five boroughs with free school meals for all children, but it is still not enough. I urge you to pledge for the finance and funding section of the Bill so that we can focus on raising it.

Henry Wain (North East): I am Henry Wain and I am from Redcar and Cleveland.

I make no secret about it: I think all students should have access to free school meals. It is the best way for us to level up our country, and its benefits far outweigh the short-term costs. We are debating costs today, and I am sure colleagues have a million and one different ideas as to how we can fund this brilliant scheme, but let me give you all a simple solution: let's make our food giants fund a fairer future.

In 2022, the fast food and takeaway industries took home a giant £22 billion in revenue, which is expected to grow to over £30 billion in the coming years. Colleagues, we must make a decision on these businesses, which oftentimes provide cheap and unhealthy food. We need to make sure that they pay their way, and one way we can do this is through funding free school meals for all primary and secondary-age students. This will cost a mere £2.5 billion out of that £22 billion per year. These businesses know that the products they sell are not the best for us; they make that clear in their adverts when they offer us the occasional bag of fruit or salad. That is why I urge us all to put in our Food for Learning campaign a statement that holds these giant companies to account.

Precious Okeowo (South East): My name is Precious Okeowo and I am the MYP for Kent.

It is one thing to advocate for this essential cause, but without a realistic and reasonable financial plan, our aspirations risk remaining mere aspirations. The statistics we have heard today underscore the urgency of this matter,

but our commitment to the cause must be matched by a commitment to a sustainable funding agreement. We are not just talking about pounds and pennies; we are talking about investing in the future of our youth.

It is paramount that we take the next couple of months to develop a financial plan that not only ensures the quick implementation of this campaign, but guarantees its continuity. We must acknowledge that for something as monumental as providing free school meals to millions of people up and down the country, a half-baked, slapdash financial strategy simply will not suffice.

In conclusion, it is vital that we approach the challenge of funding a change to the current free school meal system with the seriousness it deserves, because us just sitting here and lobbing demands at the Government without researching their financial viability is irresponsible, wasteful and, dare I say, performative.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That was a very good example of getting everything in in one minute.

Ewan Harris (East of England): I am Ewan Harris, the Member of Youth Parliament for West Norfolk.

In a previous debate, some of my colleagues mentioned local businesses. In our effort to ensure there are quality free school meals, we should prioritise this financing motion and allocate some funding to sourcing ingredients from local businesses. Not only would this support local economies; it would also guarantee that young people—our constituents—can access good-quality and ethical free school meals. I urge you to prioritise this motion to make change certain for young people.

Alexander Zlatev (Scotland): Greetings. My name is Alexander Zlatev and I am the representative for Mid Scotland and Fife. I am dressed in a black suit and my hair is brown.

Today I stand before this House to advocate for making financing and funding our priority. Doubtless it is our responsibility to ensure that young people are allowed to flourish, but is this truly possible when so many of them are rarely able to meet even their basic necessities? Starting with the good news, I am happy to report that progress has been made in Scotland, where a total of £170 million has been contributed to fund free school meals in primary schools.

Given the rising rates of child poverty, it is certain that more is needed to alleviate the plight of hunger that many young people experience throughout the country, and that adequate financing is more fundamental than ever in pursuit of this endeavour. To this end, championing universal free school meals—difficult as they are to implement—is the right step towards protecting the fundamental rights of young people. None the less, we must not be idle in the face of cuts to other essential services. I am aware that money does not grow on trees, and special care is necessary to make sure that the funding is not sourced at the expense of other vital youth services. I remain convinced that His Majesty's Government and the sovereign Parliament care just as much as we do about striking a just balance.

Eden Hingston (South West): My name is Eden Hingston and I am the representative for Plymouth, in the south-west.

I wish to oppose this motion in favour of standardisation, because what good is financing a campaign that we do not have? Nutritious and affordable food in free school meals is what will maximise a pupil's educational attainment, because it enhances their ability to focus in lessons. If we allow food quality and pricing to fluctuate, we allow education to fluctuate, and we allow certain students to fall behind their wealthier peers. We also perpetuate worse outcomes for poorer children, and we continue that vicious and unjust cycle of generational poverty.

In today's schools are our future doctors, lawyers and politicians. What happens in those classrooms is up to us. Who sits here as an MP in the future should not be determined by the income of their area and, subsequently, the quality of or access to food. Madam Deputy Speaker, you sit in this Chamber every week and watch Government debates. You watch our politicians at first hand. You have watched as some succeed and some fail. I ask you all: what would it mean for democracy if potential politicians would not get to sit here because they do not have access to the same quality food and, subsequently, education to get here? Think of equity and merit, and think of the future.

Fayiza Islam (Yorkshire and Humber): I am Fayiza, representing North Lincolnshire and Yorkshire and Humber.

The issue of financing and funding for free school meals is of utmost importance, reflecting our commitment to providing equal opportunities for every child across the UK. It is about ensuring that every child, regardless of their background, has access to a nutritious meal during their school day. Studies consistently show that access to nutritious meals positively impacts academic performance, attendance and overall health, levelling the playing field for all students. Finance for free school meals is a lifeline for families facing financial hardship. It alleviates the burden on parents, ensuring that their children receive at least one nutritious meal a day, reducing food insecurity and promoting social equality. That is why I believe that it is the most important headline today.

Emily Viney (West Midlands): I am Emily, and I am an MYP for Dudley. Financing and funding for free school meals is crucial to ensuring that every student has access to nutritious meals. It is important to explore different sorts of funding, such as Government grants, community partnerships and fundraising initiatives. By investing in free school meals, we can promote health, reduce food insecurity and support the overall wellbeing of students. The cost of living crisis has affected us because it has affected how much students can spend. It has also put some students in financial difficulty. When I held a focus group, 95% of people agreed that school meals should be cheaper and more affordable.

Rhianna Lewis (Wales): I am Rhianna, and I am the MYP for Blaenau Gwent.

Finance and funding is vital to ensure progress in our campaign. In the current cost of living crisis, the main thing I hear about is cuts to funding. It affects our youth services, sporting facilities and so many other services we use daily. We cannot let it affect our fundamental right to be fed—to not go hungry and be starved. I cannot stress the importance of ensuring that money is available to provide food for the children of our future.

As we have heard today, many parents or parental figures go hungry in order to ensure that their child or children are fed, and it is not a guarantee that those children are nourished. Three meals a day is vital to ensure that children can grow and learn. No two people in this room or in the UK are alike. We are all different and have different circumstances. The ability to have access to funding to feed hungry children in our schools and colleges aids us in bridging the gap of inequality, at least when it comes to our ability to develop and grow from childhood to adulthood. We must not ever forget that children are priceless.

Aaron Ankrah (North West): My name is Aaron, and I am representing Trafford.

For decades, the myth that the UK is a meritocracy has been preached by those whom young people idolise. From childhood we are told by people, from politicians to celebrities, that we can be whatever we want to be, as long as we work hard. Therefore, how is it conceivable that in a country where 3.9 million children live in poverty, only 2 million qualify for free school meals? In a country where over 1 million guardians have to decide whether they or their children have a hot meal, how can we tell children that their horizons are endless when there is no guarantee that they will be able to eat today? The facts are simple: a hungry child is not a productive child. Therefore, it is pertinent that we address this. It is vital to implement a formula to ensure that those children who need food get food.

Isabelle Stones (London): Equality, nourishment, health: these are the building blocks of our society. They are what we need to function. However, so many young people—the future of our society—do not have them. Access to food should not be a luxury; it should be the norm. By funding universal free school meals, we are using our position to create change. We are not speaking empty words; we are speaking the future. If not now, when, and if not us, who? I urge you to vote for this motion, not for yourselves but for the future generations.

Kayla Lincoln (North East): I am Kayla Lincoln from Sunderland. We have discussed a lot of problems in this room today, but the main resource that we need to help them is money. I would like everyone to take a brief moment to think about what makes us different from every animal we share this planet with. What makes us human? You could think on that philosophy for a while, but one true thing that makes us unique from the animal kingdom is cooking. Yes, cooking. So simple, but so effective. The importance of a good cooked meal—not only warm but nutritious—is crucial, especially for growing up. Over the holidays, these basic needs are often not met due to things like the cost of living crisis. Food costs money, and the gas or electric that you need to cook the food costs money.

I would like to share a scheme that, to my knowledge, my secondary school had in place for those on free school meals. Every day, when a school meal was bought it would go towards a total, and a portion of that total would be given to them in the form of something like an Aldi or Lidl voucher, which would be spent on food during the holidays. It can ease the cost during the holidays to help those who are on free school meals or who need financial aid to have nutritious meals at home without the cost of food itself, just the cost of cooking it.

Benjamin Pearce (South East): My name is Benjamin Pearce, MYP for Lewes and Wealdon. How many times do we hear the word “change” in politics? MYPs, the opportunity we have today is to create a real lasting change—one that may outlive us all. That change is to invest in the future of this country by voting for the funding of universal free school meals. It is an investment in the future of children that will be successful.

The Impact on Urban Health commissioned comprehensive research suggesting that for every £1 invested in universal free school meals, £1.71 will be generated in core benefits. That is an undisputable declaration of the fact that universal free school meals are an investment that will generate billions of pounds, so it is pivotal that we vote for this finance motion to enable us to invest in our future.

Lionel Mazithulela (East of England): Members of the Youth Parliament, there is no point in making a campaign to fund a campaign that we do not have. I stand before you today with a plea to prioritise the issue of holiday hunger. A young person in my constituency came to me and reported that they felt they should stockpile every piece of packaged food that they can get from their free school meals during term time in the weeks leading up to the holidays. This is not just a matter of policy, but a matter of the health and wellbeing of our nation’s young people. It is a shocking reality that we cannot ignore.

Recent findings show that 3 million young people in this country are at risk of holiday hunger, which is not far off the entire population of Puerto Rico. When the school gates close for holidays, these children and their families face the daunting prospect of food insecurity. You have the power to change this situation today. We can vote for working towards ending holiday hunger and ensuring that food is made available during the holidays to every young person who receives free school meals.

Local authorities and schools must also play their part. They have a duty to ensure that they are up to date with the needs of young people in every educational setting, so that no young person falls through the cracks, in or out of term time.

Let us make tackling holiday hunger a priority. Let us ensure that no child in our country goes to bed in the holidays with a rumbling stomach. Together we can make a difference. Vote for tackling holiday hunger, to make this difference.

Emiko L’Estrange (South West): I am Emiko L’Estrange, Member of the Youth Parliament for Mid and East Devon.

There is a growing crisis that demands our attention. Over the past 18 months, the number of households in Devon that are unable to access or afford food has surged by a staggering 70%. In 2023, the proportion of households in Devon resorting to emergency food support has risen from 2% to 5%. The overwhelming scientific opinion, which underpins common sense, is that kids cannot learn without adequate nutrition.

Families are turning to food banks such as the Trussell Trust and community larders. I especially acknowledge the fantastic work of Ottery community larder in my constituency. However, it is a travesty that families are

forced to resort to food banks or community larders when access to good-quality food is an inherent human right. The right to food is set out in international law. It is contained within the right to an adequate standard of living, which was first laid down in the universal declaration of human rights. Our commitment to this right should drive us to action, in order to ensure that every child can access school meals without discrimination.

Jake Fletcher (East Midlands): Financing and funding are crucial. However, we must look at where funding goes. For example, my friend receives £20 a day to spend on food from his parents, who are significantly rich—they are millionaires in my area. If we were to give him £3 a day, he would just get even richer. That would be a waste of money. I feel like it would be better to vote for the motion on holiday hunger. If we gave money to people who have already got it, we would just be giving money out.

Abdul Mateen Riaz (London): My name is Abdul Mateen Riaz and I am the MYP for the London Borough of Redbridge.

I ask Members not to vote for this topic and instead to cast your vote for the topic of holiday hunger. I believe that holiday hunger is a pressing and deeply troubling issue that has plagued our society for far too long. It is a stark reminder that even in our prosperous borough, there are countless children and families who go without food during what should be a time of celebration and togetherness.

We must recognise that holiday hunger is not just a matter of individual misfortune, but a systemic problem that has been entwined into the fabric of our society. It is rooted in poverty, inequality and a lack of access to resources. To tackle holiday hunger, we must address its underlying causes, advocating for policies and initiatives that uplift the most vulnerable members of our society.

Holiday hunger is not just a problem; it is a moral crisis that challenges the very essence of our humanity. It defies the principles of compassion, solidarity and social justice. It robs children of their right to a childhood filled with joy and hope. My fellow honourable MYPs, we have the power to change this narrative. We have the power to unite as a community and a society, to eradicate holiday hunger once and for all.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Member of the Youth Parliament from North Antrim to conclude the debate.

Lauren Bond (Northern Ireland): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Britain, 2023: at a time when we should be motivating children’s minds, fuelling their aspirations and driving their ambitions, we fail even to fill their stomachs. But we are not starving just stomachs; we are starving innovation, creativity and progress. We are starving our chance of a better future—a stronger Britain.

If food poverty is not the most important issue for our Government—if it is not the single most pressing priority, at the top of their agenda—then neither is the future of this country, of industry, of technology or of healthcare. We cannot be serious about the future of this country without being serious about the present,

and the present at this moment is defined by failure. While our children go hungry, poverty continues to feed off their futures.

So, what are we worth? What are we worth, as the future leaders, scientists and creators of this country? What are we worth, as the generation tasked with solving some of the greatest issues to face this planet? What are we worth, as young people failed by not only financial barriers to education but a distinct lack of action to overcome them? What are we worth?

The cost of living crisis has merely exacerbated the devastating impact of food insecurity on young people. We need a robust, sustainable solution that ensures that seeds grow and do not just wither away. Some 800,000 young people living in poverty have no access to free school meals. We need to feed our children and fuel our future. Education should not require a golden ticket; it should be open to all, and all young people, not just a lucky few, should experience its full benefits. Food poverty has created a landslide in education and we need urgent action to ensure that no child, and no future, falls through the cracks.

It seems that everything comes with a price, but when will we be enough? When will we be hungry enough for our politicians to act? When will our education be tarnished enough that they begin to piece it together again? When will our future be eroded enough for them to finally take a stand against poverty? Free school meals are not a luxury; they are a lifeline, and every child deserves a chance.

We are hungry—hungry for change and for action. It is time that politicians got out of the playground and allowed children back in, so that every child has the opportunity to learn, to develop and to become the greatest version of themselves. There is no better investment than investing in our future—investing in our young people—because you can put a price on our food, and even on our survival, but you cannot put a price on our future.

Additional Pricing

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): The Youth Parliament will now consider the fifth and final motion of the day, on additional pricing. The full motion is printed on the Order Paper. I call the Member of the Youth Parliament for Kent to move it.

2.48 pm

Shreya Nivarty (South East): The motion is,

That this House believes that young people in the UK deserve to have access to affordable food, not just at lunchtime, but from breakfast all the way to the end of the day; and calls on all UK governments to co-create additional pricing guidance, which should include recommended prices for additional food and provisions, including a cap on pricing.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. My name is Shreya Nivarty and I represent Kent.

How many of you have paid £10 for a bar of chocolate? It sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? But without sufficient caps on additional pricing, what is preventing us from living that reality? Additional food prices are soaring at the same time that financial insecurity is increasing for many families. It is not a cost that we can ignore.

How can we expect young people to have a full seven-hour day of learning and engagement if they are running on only one meal? Why are we having to pay so much just to function at our best and start each day feeling alert and open to learning? All young people deserve to eat well, from breakfast all the way to the end of the day, and that can only be achieved if we place caps on additional pricing.

When we are talking about additional pricing, we are talking about the prices of food, drinks and breakfast offered outside of the main meal. Aside from introducing caps, we also call on the Government for budgeting support for all four nations to ensure that young people are sufficiently equipped to manage funds for their school meals.

Ladies and gentlemen, Madam Deputy Speaker, cost impacts nutrition; healthy food can appear less appealing just because it is more expensive. If a young person goes into their school canteen and sees a processed option for £1 and a healthy snack for £3, what will they choose? The school caterers' body, the LACA, has shared that 28% of school caterers are using more processed food as a result of food prices rising by a staggering 30%. This is not sustainable. We, as humans and as representatives of the youth, cannot stand idly by and watch financial difficulties seep into our educational lives. We cannot let ourselves feel helpless if we or someone we love cannot afford additional food. We must take a stand.

Instead of telling you all why you should vote for this topic to be a priority, I would like to ask why you would not vote for this topic. Why would you not vote for a topic that looks at the bigger picture of the Food for Learning campaign? Why would you not vote to ensure that young people get the most out of school, from 8.30 am all the way to 4 pm? MYPs, why would you not vote to help young people achieve their full potential in school? Surely that is why we are here. [*Applause.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Member of the Youth Parliament from Rotherham to second the motion.

Aaban Shah (Yorkshire and Humber): You'll have to mind my throat today, but that is not going to stop me talking about the truth. How many times per day do you go, or want to go, to the kitchen or the shops to grab yourself a snack or refreshment? At least once, right? Is it not realistic to think that that snack or additional food, and the additional benefits from it, is important and required throughout the day—more importantly, throughout the school day, where a young person's energy consumption is high? Unfortunately, if you cannot afford such additional food, at the moment you just have to stay hungry, because there are people who think it is moral and ethical for children to stay in such a way. They think that a child can live a whole day, from the start of the school day all the way to 5 or 6 o'clock—or, in my case, 7 or 8 o'clock—living off just a small sandwich and one of them Radnor drink bottles.

Matter of fact, I'ma tell you something about myself. The only time I was not entitled to free school meals was year 7. When I was in year 7, my dad would give me £10 a week for my food. That was equivalent to £2 a day, five school days a week. Bearing in mind that the average price of a meal at my school was £2.25 and the free school meal allowance for the day was £2.25, I was already short. How do you think I felt when I saw my friends having snacks and refreshments, living life, when I was just sat in the corner hungry and feeling left out? I felt embarrassed that I could not afford the same. So what did I do? I would spend that £10 in the first two or three days of the week and then, by the time Wednesday or Thursday came about, I would go to my dad and ask him for more, which—believe me—was tough. My parents can only provide me with so much. Every parent can only provide their children with so much, no matter what background they are from.

What does this mean? It means that realistically you cannot blame me. Who would blame me—a young pre-teen, hungry and embarrassed? This is not something only I went through. People in my constituency of Rotherham went through this, and they still do. People in Yorkshire and the Humber go through this. People in England go through this. Most importantly, people in the United Kingdom go through this.

Matter of fact, some people have it worse. Some people get £7, £6 or £5 a week. How are they meant to live? They feel extra hungry, extra fatigued and extra embarrassed. It came to the point where—I kid you not—in year 7 in my secondary school, I would have students gathering around planning how to steal food from the canteen. It was not because they wanted to be cheeky; it was because they could not afford the food. They could not afford the additional food that other people could afford and would show off about. They simply couldn't. What does stealing food lead to? Crime. What does crime lead to? Prison. What does prison lead to? A lack of opportunities and a lack of safety in our country. Indirectly, think of it like that.

I urge you to vote for the motion on additional pricing so we can have caps on food prices and price reviews. We could have all sorts. Potentially, you could even have free additional food—who knows?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I need to open up the debate now, but thank you. [*Applause.*] I call the Member from the North East.

Sharon Zeng (North East): Hello, I am Sharon Zeng, and I am the MYP for North Tyneside. I surveyed over 100 students in North Tyneside, and 81% of them believed that they are paying too much. Why? Overall, 52% are spending £3 to £4 per day on school meals. The amount given for free school meals in North Tyneside is £2.40. The average meal deal, which is normally a stale, single slice of pizza and water, is £2.40. If you want to add a cookie, the cost is £3.35: 95p—nearly £1—extra for a cookie that does not fill you up much more. If I had to count on my fingers everyone in my year group alone who brings a packed lunch due to these extra costs, I would need as many hands as a spider has legs, or even more, because why would you spend £3.35 on a meal that does not fill you enough?

Food is a human right, and education is a human right. All young people should have the right to a filling, low-cost meal that will help provide them with good education. Additional pricing guidance is important, and prices need to be lowered.

Alex Pengelly (Wales): My name is Alexander Pengelly, and I represent Wrexham. Is additional pricing guidance for food a priority, or is it a priority to make sure that children and young people have school meals? Some young people do not have food in school holidays. We should focus on our other priorities. After they have been achieved, we can focus our attention on additional pricing guidance for food. After all, all children and young people should and must have free school meals.

Meghan Monington (East Midlands): I am Meghan Monington, and I am the Member of Youth Parliament for Nottinghamshire. Additional pricing is a crucial section of the debate that we need to focus on. Families who only narrowly miss the criteria for gaining access to free school meals should not be expected to be able to pay not only for their child's meals but also for overpriced additional necessities, such as a drink or breakfast.

Government statistics indicate that around 4.2 million young people were living in poverty in 2021-22. During the same period, only 1.8 million pupils were known to be eligible for free school meals. That leaves 2.4 million young people who had little to no food during school hours, and that does not even include those who do not collect their free school meals due to the stigma around it.

Hopefully, all these points show that additional pricing should be kept at a reasonable level, if not even lower. I strongly urge you to vote for this motion.

Rodrigo Palmer (North West): My name is Rodrigo Palmer. I am from Stockport. A lot of young people are losing faith in democracy. That is what I and everybody here are here to stop. We all know that free schools meals are a paramount example of where we can make sure that change happens, and show that our democracy can work.

Additional pricing not only ensures that people who are not covered by free school meals can get some other things as well, but that people are covered outside school hours. We need to make sure that we can protect those who are most vulnerable. The welfare state is crumbling, and we need something to hold it together and protect the most vulnerable in our society. I say we should make sure that democracy works for young people. That is why I firmly support this motion.

Syra Dhada (London): My name is Syra, and I am from Hillingdon. I am not denying the importance of additional pricing, but I must reiterate my support for standardisation. It is necessary for us to recognise that free school meals are drastically limited in nutritional value. Our youth—our children—are tasked with the responsibility of being our future, and they deserve nourishment beyond sufficiency. They deserve balanced meals that prepare them for learning. They deserve the best-quality meals possible, across the nation. We need standardisation to ensure that improvements are felt equally across the boroughs. In a country with such opportunity, it is more than disappointing that some children are held back by the limitations of an inadequate diet. That is why we must advocate for a systemic change, to make wellbeing and our future a priority.

Marcus Flucker (Scotland): My name is Marcus Flucker. I am a Member for north-east Scotland. I use he/him pronouns and am wearing a black suit and a tartan tie. I rise to oppose the motion on additional pricing. In March this year, the Scottish Youth Parliament published the “Young People’s Right to Food” report, and more than 50% of the young people involved in that research said that there was stigma associated with asking for support to access food. They used words such as “embarrassed” or “ashamed” when describing what they had experienced when asking for support. Let me tell you what I am ashamed of: that young people living in the world’s sixth-largest economy are having to ask for support to access a basic human right.

I urge my fellow MYPs not to vote for this motion, because the actions proposed do not go far enough. While actions such as a cap on additional pricing may be useful, the evidence shows that they are not a solution. If we are to truly eliminate the stigma that young people feel, we must focus on areas that remove barriers, not just reduce them.

In closing, my ask to colleagues is this: vote for anything—vote to reduce holiday hunger, to improve standards, for better funding or to listen to young people—but do not vote for this.

Eva Woods (East of England): My name is Eva Woods, and I am proud to represent Peterborough. I am sure that everyone in this room will understand how important it is in our education to go above and beyond to access opportunities. Whether it for apprenticeships or for UCAS forms, everyone here will have smacked the fact that they are part of the UK Youth Parliament on their CV and their LinkedIn. It has been important to go the extra mile to stand out from our peers. We need access to energy that will support everyone in our cohorts to do that. If we are not given food that allows us to complete the bare minimum of the school day, how are we expected to be able to stand out from our peers in our next life steps? I implore you to prioritise access to additional regulated pricing, to allow everybody to excel in the way that we have.

Tymek Kiliszek (South West): I am Tymek Kiliszek, the MYP for North Devon, West Devon and Torridge. If everyone in this Chamber had the same amount of food, some people would think it was too much, and some people would think it was not enough. People experience that in school. For their main meal, they

receive the same quantity of food, and maybe that is all they can afford. Many people in poverty skip breakfast, eat a limited lunch, and then have something small and non-nutritious for dinner.

Statistics in my constituency are unbelievable. In certain areas, the percentage of people living in poverty approaches one third. I know people are struggling in my area. We have the Food for Learning campaign, and we want people to feel full and able to concentrate having had food, and this topic highlights that. Additional food is expensive, and it is about time we received funding from the Government for schools, so that prices can be lowered. The Government need to give more money for important issues, such as many not being able to get a mortgage or afford rent and find a suitable home, the hundreds spent on utility bills, people not being able to afford food, local issues and school meals. The Government should spend on those things, instead of the millions spent on scrapped plans. After all, an apple a day keeps the doctor away.

Amelia Uminska (Yorkshire and Humber): My name is Amelia Uminska, and I am the Member of Youth Parliament for Leeds in Yorkshire and Humber. While I understand the need for additional pricing, when delving deeper into the issue, it is paramount to recognise that disparities in the provision of free school meals not only undermine the principle of equal opportunity, but contribute to a cycle of disadvantage for children in less privileged areas. The impact of unequal access to quality nutrition extends beyond the classroom; it influences cognitive development, concentration and overall academic performance.

By advocating for standardisation of free school meals, we are championing the notion that a child’s potential should not be determined by their postcode. In a nation that prides itself on its commitment to education, it is disheartening to witness the experience that students face based on where they live. Standardisation could help to bridge that gap and ensure that every child, from the bustling cities to the quiet countryside, has an equal chance to thrive. Imagine a future where hunger is not a barrier to learning, and where children across the nation can embark on their journeys with the same fundamental support. Standardisation of free school meals is not merely a policy proposal. It is a pledge to safeguard the wellbeing and future success of our children. It is an investment in the resilience and potential of the next generation, echoing the belief that every child, regardless of background, deserves an equal opportunity to flourish.

Madam Deputy Speaker: We will now go to a Member from the North East.

Matthew Hill (North East): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am Matthew Hill, Member of Youth Parliament for County Durham, in the North East. My constituents regularly come to me saying, “I didn’t have any breakfast this morning,” or “I’ll go home and my dinner won’t be too good.” Additional pricing can solve this. A capped rate for a cheap and accessible breakfast, dinner and tea means that they can get the most out of their education. In my constituency, we have many issues. Nice quiet towns and villages and bustling cities are very diverse places, but one thing we all struggle on—especially my colleagues around me in

the North East—is the money that families have to spend on these things. The area is experiencing bus strikes, which causes families to spend £300 or £400 a day on taxi fares, so these decisions are being made about meals more and more often, and to a more and more extreme extent. Why can't we solve this issue by ticking one little box for additional pricing?

Madam Deputy Speaker: We will now go to a Member from Wales.

Ashleigh Watkins (Wales): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. My name is Ashleigh Watkins. I represent Vale of Glamorgan in Wales, and I have a pink suit on. I have never lived in a wealthy area; I have never been to a private school. I am from an extremely poor area in Wales. In my high school, 80% of students were eligible for free school meals. However, £2.80 a day was simply not enough when something as deficient as a ham sandwich would cost £2.40; it did not even leave enough for a bottle of water. My friends would resort to going, before or during school, to the corner shop, where they daily would purchase a 5p sugary lolly, a 50p chocolate bar and a 39p energy drink. That is not an acceptable diet. Six years prior, when I was in year 7, I was able to get a hot, nutritious meal—vegetables, meat and carbs, with a drink and dessert—with the school meal allowance, so why change this?

People with the highest academic potential are being submerged back into the stereotypes around a poor, starving area, purely because of the lack of a good, hot meal. I say: cap school meal prices, encourage the breaking of stereotypes, and, speaking as a bit of a mathematician, don't let geography agree with probability. Madam Deputy Speaker, I demand you tell us when the young people of the UK will be hungry enough for the House to make a change.

Virginia Collins (North West): Hello, my name is Virginia, and I am the Member of Youth Parliament for Manchester. The price of school meals has risen by 18% since 2022. Picture the scene: you skip breakfast because you don't have enough money to eat. Then you go to school, and you are so hungry by break time that you have to eat food. You buy a bagel—we all know that—or Radnor Fizz, because you are starving. Then, by lunch time, there is no food and no money left, so you can't eat. Then you go hungry. You have lost your one opportunity for a hot meal that day, and now you have to starve. The rising price isn't working for anyone.

The UNICEF convention on the rights of the child says that every single child has a right to proper food. Now tell me: is it right that a child does not have a right even to food in the UK? No, it is not just. I urge you to vote for this motion, because the system is not working for those on free school meals—or for those not on free school meals. How is that fair?

Madam Deputy Speaker: We will now go to a Member from London.

Daniel Yubeen Kim (London): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; I have been waiting for this moment.

Obviously, there are many fundamentals—holiday hunger, quality of food, and standardisation—but, most importantly, without infrastructure, finance and funding,

they are all just belligerent words. It is like driving a car without a steering wheel: we would just crash into the trees.

At the minute, there are still students who are famished and starving due to their deprivation, and people who suffer malnutrition. As privileged ones, we must speak for and support people in need. Instead of consistently cutting the support budget, we need to consistently provide quality food for students during the cost of living crisis. For that to happen, we need you to vote for finance and funding. Thank you.

Samuel Simmons (East of England): I am Sam Simmons from the East of England. Members of the Youth Parliament, all these debates hold value—all are important—but there is one key point: that no child goes hungry. I urge you now to vote for financing and funding in order to take a logical and mature approach to free school meals and ensure that no child goes hungry. Thank you.

Lilli Morgan (South West): I am Lilli Morgan, the Member of the Youth Parliament for Plymouth. I am sure that you all enjoy having lunch with your friends, but having a full lunch while the rest of your friends are on free school meals and can barely afford even two things is just heartbreaking—it is absolutely disgusting. There is nothing you can do until you get opportunities like this to try and help them. If none of us can help those people, who will? We need to stop additional pricing. If we don't, people will starve. Prices and taxes will keep being added to our food until we reach a point where people on free school meals cannot afford anything because it costs too much.

Theo Taylor (Yorkshire and Humber): I am Theo and I represent Sheffield. I urge you to vote against this motion and for the financing and funding motion. In this cost of living crisis, we need to allocate all our resources strategically to where they would most benefit us, particularly in our schools, food banks and hunger schemes more generally.

We have talked quite a lot about price caps in this debate, but I believe that price caps require funding, especially for smaller shops that cannot afford to stop raising their prices with inflation. I also believe that enhancing financial support for already struggling food banks is a practical and impactful change that we must implement to support those institutions, which are a backbone for the most vulnerable in society who rely on them—2.6 million of our citizens. Allocating funding to schools is important not only for free school meals, but for education and training, so the food that they have stretches further and further, and is nutritious and sustainable.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Member of Youth Parliament from Essex to conclude the debate.

Ella Qurrey-Ruane (East of England): The priority for achieving free school meals is additional pricing. For many people, a school day does not feature just one purchase. From the snack at break to the bottle of water after PE, from the food before school to the drink after, everything a student eats or drinks should be reasonably priced—not just what they had at lunch.

Everything eaten or drunk in a day at school has an impact on someone's learning, so the price of these items should be fair in order to enable each and every student to succeed.

Recommended pricing guidance and price caps can help to ensure that food and beverage prices remain fairly reasonable, which is not always the case. Young people in schools two minutes apart are paying vastly different prices for the same additional items. This should not be happening. No young person should be worse off based on where they live or the school they happen to attend. It is an unfair postcode lottery that can have a hugely negative impact. Guidance and price caps will enable these costs to be affordable, not excessive.

Budgeting is an essential accompaniment to additional pricing, as it means that students can get a better understanding of how much money they are spending. Not only can they ensure they are getting value for money with their purchases, but being able to budget effectively will also be crucial in later life, no matter what they go on to do. Lessons on how to budget can ensure that students are comfortable with how and why to manage their money. Additional pricing is therefore the perfect priority, to ensure that food and drink purchased in schools is not expensive but rather economical and, above all, equitable.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The UK Youth Parliament will now vote on which of the five subjects debated today it will select as its priority focus for the remainder of the Food for Learning campaign. In the Lobby, you will be given a ballot paper. You should place an X in the box next to the subject you would like to vote for and hand the completed ballot paper to a Doorkeeper in the Lobby. Each of the campaign focuses you can vote for contain elements that are UK-wide and elements that are devolved. You have one vote.

After voting, please return to your place in the Chamber. Those of you to my right should leave the Chamber by the door behind me and turn left into the Aye Lobby behind you. Those on my left should leave by the doors at the far end of the Chamber and turn left into the No Lobby behind you. House of Commons staff will be on hand to assist you. The Lobbies are now open.

3.17 pm

Division.

Closing Addresses

3.32 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the MYP for Upper Bann to read a message from the Prime Minister.

Luke Teggart (Northern Ireland): I am Luke Teggart, the MYP for Upper Bann, in Northern Ireland. The Prime Minister's letter reads as follows:

Dear Members,

It is my pleasure to send my best wishes to all those attending and participating in the UK Youth Parliament sitting on 17 November at the House of Commons.

This annual opportunity is significant for young people as you consider and campaign on matters that have great importance in your lives. I know that the UK Youth Parliament empowers young people to raise their voices and I hope the session presents the chance for Members to see our democratic processes more closely.

It will not only allow members to discuss the views of their communities, but also tackle and debate on important national issues such as climate change, crime and the cost of living. I am aware that universal free school meals are also an issue high on the youth agenda for this session.

Whilst it will not be possible for me to attend in person due to my prior commitments, I want to extend my warmest wishes to you all for the session.

Yours Sincerely

Rishi Sunak.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Scottish National party shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, John Nicolson.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): What a privilege it is to be here, especially as I am holding on to the Dispatch Box where the Prime Minister usually stands. The Scottish National party Benches are on the other side of the Chamber and I think where I am standing now is the closest I will ever get to standing where the Prime Minister stands, although the way the Tories are tanking at the moment, who knows?

Listening to your debate today has been a real tonic after a grim week. Your kindness, careful research and optimism should be the hallmarks of this place every day. You have much to teach adult MPs. I have been listening to you talk about food and hunger: what more basic right can there be? How outrageous it is that in this country—the sixth wealthiest in the world—children go hungry. I have no idea how Tory Ministers, sitting on these Benches, sleep at night.

In Scotland, all children in primary 1 to 5 have access to free school meals and we recognise freedom from hunger as a basic right, just as you do. So is education. My party, the SNP, has made college and university free for students—there are no tuition fees. I see some English students looking astonished at that notion. When they leave university in Scotland, students do not owe any tuition money, and hundreds of thousands of young Scots have benefited from that, so you see politics really can change things for the better.

Sometimes cynics tell me politics does not change anything. Really? Politics gave women the vote, and resulted in race and disability discrimination laws. When

[John Nicolson]

I was born, it was illegal for two men to kiss one another, let alone go any further. Homosexuality was illegal, but now gay couples can marry. When I came out as a gay man, I was the first BBC news presenter ever to do so. It was all over the front pages of the tabloids and now the SNP is the gayest group of any Parliament in the world.

We were talking about food earlier. I come from a crofting farming family in the Outer Hebrides. I went to university in the United States, the first of my family to go to university, and when I came home I was both vegetarian and homosexual. My Hebridean aunts, who strongly disapproved of vegetarianism, always linked the two—gay and veggie. I think they thought if only I could be persuaded to eat a nice wee sausage and chips, I would be inoculated and would soon be bringing home a nice girl. However, it was not to be.

Your discussions today have within them the light of idealism. If only many of the MPs who sit here during the week shared you idealism. Protect that light and carry it within you—we need a generation of radical young people like you, with strong, secure beliefs, to come and populate these Benches. There will be many points in your political life at which your convictions will be threatened. Political crunch points will come along, at which time it might be easier to conceal your true values, to retreat or perhaps to hide. Do not do that—stand up and be counted.

This week and in the last few weeks, we have all been horrified at the bombardment of Gaza and the slaughter of the poor people trapped there. Six weeks ago, brutal Hamas killers burst across the border into Israel and carried out hundreds of murders and took many hostages. It was grotesque. So too has been Israel's response. Israel has been shelling the tiny strip of land and its population of 2 million people ever since. It has turned Gaza into hell: hospitals and refugee camps have been repeatedly hit, children have been dying in countless numbers, premature babies are dying for lack of oxygen, and surgeries are being carried out without anaesthetic. Can you imagine?

I have visited Israel and Palestine over many decades, both as a Member of Parliament and in my previous life as a journalist, making BBC documentaries looking at the seeds of the dispute and the bitter fruit of conflicts. The UK played a major role in sowing the seeds of the current conflict, so Westminster has an obligation to make its voice heard.

The Scottish National party—my party, which I joined when I was younger than many of you here today—tabled an amendment to the King's Speech calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. [Applause.] We managed to get the matter to a vote on Thursday. You would think that everyone would have wanted to vote to encourage a ceasefire, but we lost the vote. Every Tory MP opposed our motion, as did the Democratic Unionists. When we stood with our friends from Plaid Cymru and the Green party, we needed the help of those on the Labour Benches. Surely Labour would stand with us. But the Labour leadership chose to abstain on the vote, and if any Labour MP followed his or her conscience, they were to be sacked. What a challenge for any MP.

One of my very best friends in this place is a young Labour MP, and my pal had to decide whether to represent their constituents and vote with their convictions

in favour of the ceasefire, or to obey their party leadership in the voting Lobby. The consequences of opposing the Whips can be severe. My pal could be sacrificing their political career to support a ceasefire. Really, the vote was always going to be lost, because the Government were not supporting it, so why should my pal raise their voice in support of a lost cause?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. It has been pointed out to me that we are here to discuss the motions on today's Order Paper, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman will take into account that there will be various views about that issue.

John Nicolson: Well, Madam Deputy Speaker, we have seen the views of Members today. [Applause.] I have talked about food, which was the last debate we had, but my theme—I hope you will allow me to develop it a little—is following your conscience. My friend voted to follow their conscience. It is too soon to know what the punishment will be, but my friend has earned the respect of their constituents, colleagues and MPs across parties.

I have been heartened by your debates today, and I have been very impressed by the quality. I have been touched by the passion of your convictions. As you grow into different political roles, there will be moments when you will be pressed to abandon your beliefs. These Benches have seen enough politicians without principles, and we do not need any more of them.

Thank you for being here. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for presiding, and thank you to all of you for representing a future of hope, of conviction and of idealism. It has been a pleasure to watch. [Applause.]

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Member of the Youth Parliament for Telford and The Wrekin to provide closing remarks. [Applause.]

Rae Anyidoho (West Midlands): My name is Rae. I am in a rose quartz suit—it is not pink; it is rose quartz. Let's get that out of the way.

Let us start by saying a major thank you to the Members of the Youth Parliament and those from overseas territories who are here today. Words have the power to destroy, to condemn entire nations and to tear down the foundations of this very society, but today we have seen that, when nurtured, our words become something more. They are a power—a power that exists in the creation of all that is good, a solution to the wounds of our past, and a path to our future. I applaud every one of you here today, because your existence, and your voice inside and outside these walls, means something and will shape our collective future.

From the depths of my heart, I thank all those who made today possible, including Mr Speaker, Madam Deputy Speaker, all the great House of Commons staff—including the Catering team; the Parliamentary Security Department; Broadcasting, Communications, *Hansard* and the Clerks; David Clark, Brett Theobald and Siani Bettles; and the Doorkeepers, led by Phil Howse—MPs for granting us permission to meet, the Leader of the House, Lilian Greenwood, Stuart Andrew, John Nicolson and the British Youth Council.

I want to give a special mention to the UK Youth Parliament Steering Group, who know why I am so thankful. *[Applause.]* What is more, I want to say a massive thank you to our youth workers, from the ones who brought us here today to the ones watching at home and from afar. *[Applause.]* To those who spend their time supporting us in our efforts to become the best versions of ourselves, I and all of us in this room owe so much to you. Words cannot articulate my gratitude. Thank you.

Most importantly, I want us all to take a moment to really think about the young people we do this for. Frankly, it is scary to exist during a time in which there is so much uncertainty and fear, when it is easy to feel as if one's existence and voice does not matter. To all young people, I tell you this: our voice is the most important thing we have, and it is the ability to use it and speak out that makes us so powerful. As I draw today to a close, we must all remember how far each and every one of us has come in our role as MYPs. Today our words have become echoes throughout history—echoes that champion our very existence. I am so proud of each and every one of us in this room. Let us go out with a bang over these last few months. Thank you so much. *[Applause.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: I now have the result of the Division, which is as follows: holiday hunger had 68 votes; quality of food had 24; standardisation had 31; finance and funding had 79; and additional pricing got 17 votes. I can confirm that the winning subject was finance and funding. *[Applause.]* This topic will be the UK Youth Parliament's priority focus for the remainder of its Food for Learning campaign.

Before we adjourn, I would like to extend my thanks to those who facilitated today. Thank you to members of the British Youth Council. Thank you to the staff in the Speaker's Office for organising today's sitting. Thank you to Phil Howse and his team of Doorkeepers for ensuring its smooth running. I hope that you will give a round of applause to them. *[Applause.]* Thank you to *Hansard* and the Broadcasting team for recording today's sitting, and to the Clerks at the Table, who diligently upheld procedure. *[Applause.]* Thank you to the Deputy Serjeant at Arms for ensuring our safety.

Finally, thank you all very much for your inspiring contributions. I sit in for a lot of debates—Mr Nicolson can confirm that—and you have all supported each other. Although you may have different views, you have listened to each other, and that is such an important part of debate—listening and learning from each other. We could all learn a lot from you. I can assure you that I and the Members of Parliament who have seen the debates today will take very seriously the points you have raised. On a slightly lighter note, I think it is absolutely marvellous that nobody was staring at their phone throughout the debate. You gave each other your undivided attention. I really appreciate the way that you have conducted yourselves today.

Please go back to your constituencies and talk about Parliament. You can follow us on the parliamentary channels, and I hope that you will. Please encourage people to participate in our precious democracy. This is the mother of Parliaments. You have been here today as an inspiration not just to those who are here but to our whole country. I hope you will take that message back from us. Your passionate contributions to today's debate have been most welcome. Thank you.

Youth Parliament adjourned at 3.51 pm.

