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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 3 March 2020

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

SELECTION

Ordered,

That Amanda Milling be discharged from the Committee of Selection and Stuart Andrew be added.—(*Iain Stewart.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Low-Carbon Industries

1. **Seema Malhotra** (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to support UK-based low-carbon industries. [901041]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Alok Sharma): Supporting low-carbon industries is central to my Department's mission to deliver our net zero target. We are backing our ambition with action. Since 2012, coal use on the grid has fallen from 40% to less than 3% in 2019, and renewable electricity generation has quadrupled since 2010, with low-carbon electricity providing more than 50% of our total energy needs.

Seema Malhotra: In 2018, investment in acquisitions in the UK's solar dropped to just £0.3 billion, from £1.6 billion in 2015. Should the Government not be doing more to support renewable power, in the light of the net zero target—which the Secretary of State mentioned—and the closure of the feed-in tariff, especially given that German, Italian and Spanish companies are now investing over six times more than UK companies in low-carbon technologies?

Alok Sharma: I am delighted that the hon. Lady has raised the issue of solar power, because, as she will know, solar photovoltaics is a UK success story. There has been rapid deployment over the past eight years, and more than 99% of the UK's solar PV capacity has been deployed since May 2010. The latest figures indicate that we now have more than 1 million solar installations, or 13.4 GW, of capacity installed.

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): In Cornwall, we have some exciting new emerging industries such as geothermal energy and lithium extraction. How is my right hon. Friend encouraging those industries to produce green energy in the future?

Alok Sharma: We are putting significant funds behind the renewables sector, and, as my hon. Friend will know, we are committed to increasing our research and development spending to 2.4% of GDP by 2027. I want the UK to be a science and R&D superpower, and that is what we are engaged in.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Why are the Government so opposed to onshore wind energy generation?

Alok Sharma: The hon. Gentleman may have missed yesterday's announcement about the fourth contracts for difference allocation round, but if he reads that announcement, he will see the points that we have made. The proposals that we have presented are there to help the UK achieve its 2015 net zero ambition.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his support for the onshore wind sector. What support are the Government providing to advance the hydrogen economy and to decarbonise the hard to abate sectors?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Hydrogen can, of course, play a key role in net zero efforts, alongside electricity. My Department is investing in innovation, with up to £121 million supporting a range of projects to explore and develop the potential of low-carbon hydrogen.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): One of the UK's great industrial success stories in recent decades has been the automotive industry. What discussions does the Secretary of State plan to have with the industry to help ensure that the UK is best placed to make the transition from internal combustion engines to electric vehicles?

Alok Sharma: Within days of taking office, I spoke to our major automotive manufacturers, and I have had meetings with a number of them. However, the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We want to encourage electric vehicles, and we are also committed to securing investment for a UK gigafactory. Last year, we announced up to £1 billion of new money to support R&D and supply chains for electric vehicles.

Research and Development Investment

2. **Julian Sturdy** (York Outer) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase investment in research and development. [901042]

11. **Bim Afolami** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase investment in research and development. [901051]

13. **Mrs Flick Drummond** (Meon Valley) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase investment in research and development. [901053]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Alok Sharma): The Government are already increasing public spending on research and development by £7 billion over five years, the biggest increase in public funding for R&D on record. Every pound of

public expenditure on R&D leverages a further £1.40 of additional private investment, generating even greater returns for the UK.

Julian Sturdy: Given that nearly 50% of the core science budget currently goes to just three cities in southern England, can the Secretary of State assure me that the increase in R&D funding will do more to favour the regions outside the south, so that in future both my city of York and other regional hubs across Yorkshire, such as Leeds and Hull, will receive their fair share for the purposes of research and innovation?

Alok Sharma: I know that my hon. Friend is hugely supportive of R&D, and that last month he opened the Institute of Technology at York College. I absolutely agree that that is part of our levelling-up agenda. We want to support centres of excellence across the country. In December last year, UK Research and Innovation awarded £24 million to the University of York for a quantum communications hub, and we will set out our ambitious play strategy for R&D in the second half of this year.

Bim Afolami: Rothamsted Research in my constituency is a world-leading agricultural research centre, and we have made huge strides in commercialising that scientific knowledge, working with agritech start-ups. I am working with Rothamsted to build a new venture capital fund for agritech, working with those start-ups to incubate and develop them so that we can improve this facility, not just for Rothamsted and the region but for the whole country. Will the Secretary of State provide Government support for this work and come to see the work that we are doing at Rothamsted?

Alok Sharma: I am delighted that my hon. Friend is showing his characteristic commitment to innovation by supporting an agritech venture capital fund. As he notes, Rothamsted has a world-renowned reputation for agricultural research, and that is why UKRI has awarded £3.4 million to determine protein abundance in plants at that research institute. Either I or the Science Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Amanda Solloway)—would be happy to meet him to discuss how the Government can support his proposals.

Mrs Drummond: I also welcome the emphasis that the Government are placing on research and development. Will my right hon. Friend tell me what further action is being taken on the proposal for a UK advanced research projects agency, following the departmental meeting last year?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The UK is ranked fifth in the global innovation index, and our strengths in R&D mean that we are well placed to develop a new funding body to specialise in high-risk, high-reward projects. As I have said, I am absolutely determined that the UK should be a global science superpower, and my Department is making good progress on a UK advanced research projects agency. We are engaging with a wide range of researchers and innovators, and we will set out further plans in due course.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State and the Science Minister to their places. Science is critical to our national prosperity, and it is important that it should be led by them, rather than by the misfit master of Downing Street, so can the Secretary of State clarify the confusing statement from No. 10 on the European research programme? International collaboration is the heartbeat of research and development. For every £1 we put into the European Union programme, we got £1.30 back, and such funding is essential if we are to retain our place as a global science superpower, so will the Secretary of State boost UK science by confirming that we will be going for full associate membership?

Alok Sharma: Of course I want the UK to be a science superpower, and we have set out our views on expanding the R&D budget. On Europe, our EU negotiating objectives are very clear: the UK will consider participation in Horizon Europe and Euratom, but this will be part of the wider negotiations.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Royal College of Physicians has found that something like 64,000 people a year die prematurely as a result of unclean air at a cost of some £20 billion. In addition to continuing the research and development into electric cars, will the Secretary of State lobby the Chancellor and the Environment Secretary to continue the grant of £3,500 for clean cars, so that we can have an enforceable regime for air quality and a platform for research and development and for exports in the green industries, particularly in relation to sustainable transport?

Alok Sharma: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. We currently have 460,000 green jobs in this country, and we want to push that to 2 million. I would be happy to meet him to discuss the specific point that he has raised.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, universities have played a critical role in research and development. What help will the Secretary of State give to Queen's University and Ulster University in Belfast, as well as to the Greenmount Agricultural College, so that they can apply for funding to help research and development across the whole United Kingdom?

Alok Sharma: Of course, UKRI provides funding for a whole range of universities. Again, if the hon. Gentleman has specific ideas for projects, perhaps he would come forward with them.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): It is possible to build a house that costs nothing to heat, but that is not happening at scale at the moment. Does my right hon. Friend consider it part of his Department's responsibilities to support research into making this more widespread, which would be hugely beneficial for the planet?

Alok Sharma: I know that my hon. Friend is an authority on the house building sector, and I had an opportunity to work with him on these issues when I was the Housing and Planning Minister. He raises an important point. We know that 15% of emissions are

from housing, and we are looking to see how we can bring that down as part of the net zero target.

Aerospace Sector: Innovation

3. **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): What plans he has to support innovation in the aerospace sector. [901043]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Nadhim Zahawi): The hon. Gentleman, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on aerospace, will know that aerospace is a high-value growth sector driven by innovation, which is why the Government and the industry are co-investing £3.9 billion up to 2026 in aerospace research and development and a further £300 million in the future flight challenge.

Christian Matheson: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. The UK leads the world in aerospace technology, but it faces the same pressures as other sectors with regard to environmental sustainability, so may I urge him to increase long-term funding for the industry so that we can retain our global lead while meeting the challenge of net zero?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Gentleman raises an important question. The Prince of Wales and I co-chaired a deep dive at the Whittle laboratory, with the whole industry around the table, to consider how we can deliver on net zero for the industry. We were targeting a fully electric aircraft that, at 500 miles, could cover most of Europe and take 180 passengers, and of course we are looking at other technologies for longer haul flights. We are also creating the innovators of the future with 500 additional master's level postgraduate places for aerospace.

Clean Growth Industries: New Jobs

4. **Simon Fell** (Barrow and Furness) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the number of new jobs in clean growth industries. [901044]

7. **Matt Vickers** (Stockton South) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the number of new jobs in clean growth industries. [901047]

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister—and welcome.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Amanda Solloway): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The Government are committed to making the UK a world leader in clean growth, building on existing strengths in sectors such as nuclear and offshore wind. We are taking action to deliver that, including by investing £3 billion in low-carbon innovation to 2021 and £170 million from the industrial strategy challenge fund to support our industrial decarbonisation mission to create at least one low-carbon industrial cluster by 2030.

Simon Fell: Tidal energy could be a game changer for my constituency of Barrow and Furness, for Morecambe bay and for the wider United Kingdom, through clean energy production and the ability to lead the world in

this technology. Does my hon. Friend agree that, when considering the viability of these schemes, we have to rewrite the Treasury's Green Book to take into account not only the unit cost of energy produced, but the value to the UK of leading in this technology and the social impact of bringing the schemes to constituencies such as mine?

Amanda Solloway: I thank my hon. Friend for that question; I know how passionately he cares about the issue. I agree that the seas around the UK offer huge opportunities for cutting emissions and growing our economy. The offshore wind projects near his constituency offer an excellent example of UK leadership in renewable power. We are determined to drive growth in all parts of the UK and ensure that our assessment of projects takes full account not just of carbon savings, but of the growth and opportunities that they can provide for people across the country.

Matt Vickers: The Net Zero Teesside project aims to decarbonise the Teesside industrial cluster by as early as 2030, capturing up to 6 million tonnes of carbon dioxide annually. The project could support up to 5,500 direct jobs, and it could help to safeguard as many as 16,000 existing jobs in the Tees valley. The UK has a unique chance to lead global development of a new carbon capture, utilisation and storage industry. Will the Government prioritise this technology?

Amanda Solloway: My hon. Friend, who I know cares passionately about this issue, makes a really good point; CCUS will be vital to meeting our net zero target and revitalising the UK's industrial areas. The Government have invested over £50 million in CCUS innovation, and recently we consulted on potential business models to help progress deployment. The CCUS action plan aims to enable the commissioning of the first facility in the UK in the mid-2020s. We committed in our manifesto to investing £800 million towards that, and £500 million to help energy-intensive industries move to low-carbon techniques.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): If the Government want to help clean growth, they can invest in the Mersey tidal power project. It is clean, entirely predictable, and could power 1 million homes. It offers high-quality jobs and has massive domestic and export potential. Steve Rotherham and the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority have just committed a further £3.5 million to the project, so will the Government back the people of the north-west by supporting investment in this exciting new project? It is a chance to demonstrate that they are interested in and serious about tackling the climate crisis.

Amanda Solloway: Yes, absolutely. We need to do that for research and development in all technologies, and I will welcome the opportunity to meet the hon. Gentleman in the future.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Minister says the UK is a world leader in offshore wind, but the reality is that too many manufacturing and supply chain jobs go abroad following the award of contracts for difference. Will she look seriously at including

a quality assessment mechanism in the bid process to incentivise companies to use UK firms such as CSWind and BiFab?

Amanda Solloway: We are making sure that we get to 60% UK employment in manufacturing by investing in R&D. We are committed to doing that.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Nuclear fusion and cleantech are key drivers of the fourth industrial revolution that will help to create hundreds of thousands of jobs across the whole country this decade. Will my hon. Friend ensure that the COP26 summit is used to showcase our country's green entrepreneurs?

Amanda Solloway: Very simply, yes.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): As the Government rejected the opportunity to create new clean jobs when they scrapped the Swansea bay tidal lagoon, which had huge potential for communities along the Severn to kick-start further lagoons, may I, along with other hon. Members, urge them to look again at the huge potential of tidal power?

Amanda Solloway: I can confirm that we have a commitment to net zero, and we are doing everything we can to look at carbon neutral.

Energy-Intensive Industries: Decarbonisation

5. **Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con):** What support his Department is providing to help energy-intensive industries decarbonise. [901045]

19. **Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con):** What support his Department is providing to help energy-intensive industries decarbonise. [901060]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Nadhim Zahawi): We have schemes worth nearly £2 billion operating, or in development, to support our vital energy-intensive industries to decarbonise. We will also invest in building the UK's first fully deployed carbon capture, usage and storage cluster, and we are progressing carbon capture and hydrogen business models, both of which are crucial technologies in decarbonising our industry.

Jonathan Gullis: Achieving net zero is a considerable challenge for energy-intensive industries like ceramics, given the twin requirements of decarbonising without reducing international competitiveness. However, it is a challenge the sector can and will rise to, provided the UK puts supportive policies in place. Are the Government prepared to work actively with the ceramics industry, like Churchill China and Steelite, to help incentivise decarbonisation without, critically, undermining its international competitiveness?

Nadhim Zahawi: We must work together with industry to help our vital manufacturing regions benefit from clean growth opportunities. Stoke-on-Trent North is lucky to have such a Member championing its cause. We have a number of schemes in place, such as the transforming foundation industries challenge fund, the industrial heat recovery scheme and climate change

agreements, to support industries like ceramics to cut bills and save carbon. In addition, we will be opening the industrial energy transformation fund to applications for phase 1 this spring.

Jack Brereton: Manufacturers in Stoke-on-Trent rely on energy-intensive processes to create their world-class products. What assistance can the Government give to help innovation in reducing the amount of carbon emissions generated in those processes?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) and, of course, the south is as lucky as the north to have such a fantastic champion in this House.

We have a number of schemes, as I have already mentioned, particularly the transforming foundation industries challenge fund, which will support energy-intensive industries to work with each other to innovate in reducing carbon emissions. This is a joint Government and industry fund. The first competition for projects closed at the beginning of February, and applicants are due to find out later this month whether they have been successful.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Teesside is a major centre for high-carbon, energy-intensive industries, which are nervous about high energy costs, the future of the REACH regulations and carbon costs. It is good to have my near neighbour, the hon. Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers), also supporting the CCUS campaign, but how can the Minister reassure the industry that the Government will address the high cost issues and, in particular, the REACH regulations that he is about to ditch?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. We engaged with industry constantly throughout this process: when I took this job on last year, we engaged with industry over REACH, and we are looking at a UK REACH. Most importantly, we are looking at the energy-intensive industries and how we can innovate, for example, in steel and in the steel cluster. We have had good news today for British Steel, and we can use the investment that the Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth is making in carbon capture, usage and storage to turn the industry into the greenest steel industry in Europe.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Will the Government help to decarbonise the Rhondda? I ask because following the flooding we have seen significant landslides on former coal sites. I do not want to overstate this, but there is some anxiety about what that might mean for the future and stability of some of these tips. Will the Minister make sure that the Secretary of State meets me and other MPs in affected areas to make sure that the Coal Authority is doing everything in its power to make sure everybody is safe?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. The Secretary of State will certainly meet him and other concerned MPs and make sure that the Coal Authority is doing everything it can. I would also like to visit to see for myself what is happening, so

that we can work together on this. Getting to net zero by 2050 is a joint effort by the whole of this House, not just this Government.

Support for Small Businesses

6. **Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to support small businesses. [901046]

12. **Ben Everitt** (Milton Keynes North) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to support small businesses. [901052]

22. **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to support small businesses. [901063]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): Last month, we launched [businesssupport.gov.uk](https://www.businesssupport.gov.uk), our new website bringing together all Government information available to help businesses start, grow and scale. In my first week, I was delighted to chair the Rose review board, which works with industry leaders to break down the barriers that female entrepreneurs face.

Robbie Moore: I thank the Minister for his response. Last week, my constituents Martin and Deanne Brook proudly opened a brand new post office on Halifax Road in Cross Roads, which they operate in conjunction with their already successful small family business, SMS Workshop Supplies Ltd. What steps are the Government taking to help incentivise small business owners like them to explore the possibility of providing post office services as a means of safeguarding the post office network?

Paul Scully: This is about working with Members such as my hon. Friend and coming up with imaginative ways of opening up post offices, including Martin and Deanne's in their hardware store. It is also important that we take the Post Office's relationship with postmasters seriously and closely monitor the situation during the legal proceedings that many people are going through and have been through recently. The Post Office, under its new chief executive officer, has since accepted that it got things wrong. He has apologised and said that it aims to re-establish a positive relationship with postmasters. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is working actively with the Post Office on this matter and will hold it to account on its progress. We are also looking into what more needs to be done.¹

Ben Everitt: In Milton Keynes, we can get our groceries delivered by robot, and I was fortunate last week to meet some of the humans from Starship Technologies who wrangle these robots. What support is my hon. Friend giving to small businesses and start-ups such as Starship Technologies, which are at the forefront of innovative new technology?

Paul Scully: Fortunately, questions are not answered by robot yet, so I am still here. [Interruption.] Well, there is a bit of character and it is less robotic. I believe that 50,000 deliveries have been done by Starship Technologies in Milton Keynes, so that is an excellent example. We need to make sure that small businesses can innovate, scale and grow, and we are supporting

them to do so through such schemes as Innovate UK smart grants, tax credits and the annual investment allowances, and through programmes supported by the British Business Bank. Research and development tax credits are the single biggest Government support for business investment in R&D. So far, just over £4.3 billion has been claimed through those tax credits in 2017-18, £2.3 billion of which was claimed through the small and medium-sized enterprise scheme.

Rob Butler: Small businesses in my constituency, including in the village of Stokenchurch, frequently tell me that they find it particularly hard to make a profit on the traditional high street. What can the Minister do to help traditional town centres to thrive and become commercial and community hubs?

Paul Scully: We want our town centres and high streets, including in Stokenchurch in Aylesbury, to be vibrant community hubs where people can live, shop and use services. To support that, we are delivering a £1 billion future high streets fund, as part of a £3.6 billion towns fund to level up our regions. We are committed to a fundamental review of business rates, which the Treasury will announce in due course.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I welcome the Minister and the Secretary of State and his new team to their places. I look forward to our future exchanges.

Last week, I visited a café in Calder Valley that, despite having just started trading, has been ruined by relentless flooding. The owners, like the owners of so many small businesses, have received no support from the Government and have been left to repair the damage on their own, at their own cost, with the help of local people. Will the Minister outline to the House what meaningful financial support has been made available to businesses affected by flooding? Will the Government protect such businesses in future by outlining in the Budget an increase in the UK's capital spend on flood defences to approximately £1 billion a year, as advised by the Environment Agency and the National Infrastructure Commission?

Paul Scully: We have spent £2.6 billion on flooding so far and announced £4 billion in our manifesto. The business recovery grant provides local authorities with funding of £2,500 for severely affected businesses like the café the hon. Lady described. It is important that we support small and medium-sized businesses to recover and help to support local economies.

Rebecca Long Bailey: The Minister must acknowledge that that is a paltry amount of support. According to the Federation of Small Businesses, flooding will cost small businesses hundreds of millions of pounds, and thousands cannot find affordable flood insurance. Furthermore, on flood defence the Government have pledged less than half the capital advised—only £450 million a year for the next six years. The Prime Minister refused to hold a Cobra meeting following the floods and he could not even be bothered to visit the flood-affected areas. Is it not the case that the Government's response to this disaster is yet another example of a part-time Prime Minister failing to provide the leadership that our country needs in a time of crisis?

1. [Official Report, 13 March 2020, Vol. 673, c. 4MC.]

Paul Scully: The Prime Minister is leading on this situation from the front. He is getting money out the door. As a former small-business owner, I would welcome any visit from the Prime Minister, but what I would welcome more is the money that we are getting out the door on day one to help these businesses.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State and his new ministerial team to their places.

The UK's proposals on EU trade negotiations could reduce Scottish GDP by 6.1%, or £1,600 per person. Small businesses, including many in the food sector, simply cannot afford to cope with the prospect of such Mad Max economics. They need help now, so will the Minister join me in calling for a cut to employers' national insurance, to help them and to help to protect jobs?

Paul Scully: We will see what happens in the Budget. Employment allowance has benefited businesses—including my former business—up and down the country. Businesses want meaningful things in the Budget, rather than platitudes from the Opposition.

Drew Hendry: That response comes as absolutely no surprise, given the email from a key adviser to the Chancellor leaked at the weekend that said that the food sector “isn't critically important”. We all remember the Prime Minister's shocking attitude and use of the F-word in relation to business concerns when he said “F*** business”. It now seems that the Government are doubling down on that and it is “F*** farming” and “F*** fishing.” With the Minister refusing to support businesses in their hour of need, it is clear to all that this Government deserve an F for their economic incompetence.

Paul Scully: To date, the UK Government have committed up to £3.08 billion for city region and growth deals throughout Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Since 2012, the British Business Bank has issued more than 4,200 start-up loans in Scotland, worth more than £32 million in total. That is actual action for businesses.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I thank the Minister for his commitment to small business. Small businesses in Cornwall, and especially on the Isles of Scilly, face an unprecedented challenge on 1 January as a result of the proposed immigration Bill. Will the Minister work with the Home Office to make sure that small businesses that do not have a workforce in the local area sitting around looking to and able to fill posts are able to carry on doing business next year?

Paul Scully: I happily confirm to my hon. Friend that our new immigration system is flexible, so, yes, we will work with businesses all around the country to ensure that we have the skills that we need to allow businesses to thrive.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): For the past two weekends, properties and businesses in the Rhondda Cynon Taff area—I am one of the MPs for that authority area—have seen devastating flooding. Just this week, I was out helping businesses in my constituency find sandbags and pumps from my local authority. The Welsh Government, the Rhondda Cynon Taff council and council leader

Andrew Morgan are offering support to small businesses, so if the Minister is to announce additional funding for those businesses that have been impacted, I plead with him not to forget about Welsh small businesses.

Paul Scully: I have already talked about the £2,500 that we have been getting out through that business recovery grant, but we will always look to continue to work with businesses in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland as well as in England. It is important, as the hon. Gentleman said, that communities come together, which is why there is support for community economies, ensuring that they can continue to survive and thrive.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): My hon. Friend will be a great supporter of small businesses, so will he get off to a fast start by urging the Treasury to scrap its misguided changes to IR35? Those changes are punishing small businesses, with large companies already implementing blanket bans that the Treasury had said in a statement would not yet be implemented and with the HMRC's own assessment tool creating confusion, not clarity, for entrepreneurs.

Paul Scully: I am sure the Chancellor will hear that question. As my hon. Friend well knows, that is a matter for the Budget, which is still under review.

COP26

8. **Nadia Whittome** (Nottingham East) (Lab): What steps he has taken to prepare for COP26. [901048]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Alok Sharma): I am delighted to have been appointed COP President. I have already held discussions with former COP Presidents, including Paris COP President Laurent Fabius. I met, among others, the UN Deputy Secretary General Amina Mohammed and Patricia Espinosa at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Last week, together with the Prime Minister's COP26 climate finance adviser, Mark Carney, I launched the COP26 finance strategy. My officials and I are working at pace to deliver a successful summit.

Nadia Whittome: COP26 will be the most critical talks since Paris, yet preparations so far have been beset by chaos. What response can the Minister provide to the former COP President who says that this Government are presiding over “a huge lack of leadership” on the issue. The Prime Minister has admitted to her that he does not even understand climate change. Does the Minister acknowledge the embarrassing lack of credibility and competence that the Prime Minister has shown on COP26 preparations?

Alok Sharma: I thank the former COP President for her work. The hon. Lady talks about the Prime Minister's leadership. I can assure Members that when we were at the UN General Assembly in September, there was a huge amount of positivity around his leadership in doubling our international climate finance commitment. She will also know that last month the Prime Minister launched the Year of Climate Action. He is absolutely leading on this issue from the front, and the rest of us are supporting him. Let me tell her that we are absolutely

determined to make sure that COP26 is a success, not just for the UK but because it matters to the whole world.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): Every country has to submit its contribution to climate action before COP26 meets. Why is the Secretary of State preparing the UK's contribution statement on the basis of the fifth carbon budget, which works towards a target of only 80% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, when this House has determined that the target to be met should be net zero by 2050?

Alok Sharma: We met the first two carbon budgets, and we are on track to meet the third. Of course, I recognise the need for further action: 2020 will be a year of climate action, as I have said, and we have new plans to decarbonise key sectors in industry.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I congratulate the Department on its far-sighted announcement yesterday that sets the tone for COP26 by allowing onshore wind and solar projects, which have local support, to bid for funding. The announcement also floated a further pot for less developed technologies, such as tidal stream and wave, some of which the Energy Minister and I met last week. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should pursue this opportunity to develop diverse sources of green energy and look closely at the innovative tax credit proposal, innovation power purchase agreement, to help some of these technologies get off the ground?

Alok Sharma: I make the general point that innovation is vital in all sectors of industry, but particularly in the renewables sector. As my hon. Friend will know, the proposal that we set out will help the UK to achieve its 2050 net zero ambition. Ultimately, this is about achieving value for money by driving further cost reductions in renewable electricity.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State and his new ministerial team to their places. The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee looks forward to taking evidence from them, and I am sure that they look forward to that as well.

May I follow up on the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) about our fourth and fifth carbon budgets? Those carbon budgets are premised on achieving an 80% reduction in carbon emissions, yet this House has unanimously passed legislation to achieve net zero. It is neither coherent, nor showing leadership, for our fourth and fifth carbon budgets to be based on an outdated objective that this House has rejected. Can the Secretary of State confirm that we will be updating our fourth and fifth carbon budgets—and, crucially, that we will meet them?

Alok Sharma: I thank the hon. Lady for welcoming my ministerial team and me. Of course I look forward to coming before her Select Committee. Let me be absolutely clear: we are one of the first countries in the world to have legislated for a net zero target, and we have demonstrated our global leadership. We have met the first two carbon budgets and are on track to meet the third, but I take her point.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I agree that one of the best ways of preparing for COP26 is bringing forward the new contracts for difference auctions for onshore wind and solar, which will help us to achieve net zero. Could we also take this opportunity to demonstrate to the hard-working taxpayers of Rother Valley and across the country that we can reduce their bills by going green. Can we make it a key part of COP26 to show that going green is better value for those hard-working people?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Offshore wind prices have dropped by over two thirds between 2015 and 2019 because of the CfD auctions. Going green is positive for the economy: GDP has grown by 75% since 1990, yet we have also managed to reduce emissions by 43%.

Renewable Energy: Scotland

9. **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Scotland on renewable energy. [901049]

The Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth (Kwasi Kwarteng): The hon. Gentleman will know that we have many conversations across government. I have spoken with the Secretary of State for Scotland, as well as the Energy Minister in the devolved Administration. In fact, I spoke to colleagues just yesterday.

Stuart C. McDonald: I for one would like to say how delighted I am that the Government have finally listened to the common-sense advice of Scottish National party Members on the issue of onshore renewable energy and contracts for difference, even if the delay has cost us five wasted years. Looking ahead, will the Minister ensure that the contracts for difference process is reformed to maximise growth and opportunities for the Scottish and UK supply chains, and how exactly will he go about doing that?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As the hon. Gentleman will know, we have been particularly successful in the offshore wind auctions, and we came to our conclusion not because of SNP lobbying, but because we felt that having a pot 1 auction was the best way to reach the net zero carbon target in a timely way by 2050.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): It is important to put it on the record that not everyone in Scotland will welcome yesterday's announcement, not least my constituents, who have more wind turbines—in sight or planned—than any other constituency in the United Kingdom. Given the ineffective planning system operated by the Scottish Government and their willingness to override local decision making, what reassurance can the Minister give my constituents that they will not to be overwhelmed by continuing wind farms?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his question. We are very mindful of community consent and engagement with the planning process through consultation periods. We are also ensuring that

the planning regime is robust. On balance, it was felt that we needed to make a move on this pot 1 auction in order to reach the target.

UK Export Finance: Coal

10. **Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for International Trade on ending UK export finance for (a) coal mining and (b) coal-fired power station projects; and if he will make a statement. [901050]

The Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth (Kwasi Kwarteng): The right hon. Gentleman will know that we have announced, with the Department for International Trade, that we will no longer provide any new export finance or new export credit for thermal coalmining or coal-powered plants overseas.

Stephen Timms: I am grateful to the Minister for that confirmation. Following the Prime Minister's announcement at the UK-Africa investment summit, will the Minister set out whether there will be a transition period prior to the welcome situation that he has described? Does he agree that UK Export Finance should be promoting the transition away from all fossil fuels in developing countries as soon as possible?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Any form of financing should absolutely take into account our net zero commitment, and it is in the process of doing so. On the question of coal, I take the opportunity to reiterate the fact that the Prime Minister, only last month, announced the intention to consult on bringing forward the coal closure to 1 October 2024. Even last month, only about 3% of our power generation was coming from coal. So this is a very achievable target, and we are very hopeful that we can take coal entirely off the grid by October 2024.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The move to generate electricity from sources other than coal is very welcome, but some manufacturing processes will still require a supply of coal. Does the Minister agree that it is better for that coal to be supplied from domestic sources rather than being shipped halfway around the world?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend is right. Obviously, from a coal and carbon emissions reduction point of view, it makes sense to have a locally based coal source rather than shipping it in a very costly way halfway around the world. That is a fair point. On the point about coal, the 2024 target is absolutely achievable. It is something we are absolutely committed to doing. In the long run, coal will be taken completely off the power generation grid, and that is something to be celebrated across the whole House.

Topical Questions

T1. [901066] **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Alok Sharma): My Department is leading the green revolution, working towards a target of net zero emissions by 2050. We are unleashing innovation and making the UK the best place in the world to start and grow a business. We are creating better corporate governance, improving employment protections and

working practices and contributing to the UK's labour market strategy. Our preparations for COP26 are gathering pace, ramping up momentum towards a global zero carbon economy.

John Mc Nally: The recent BEIS Committee report was clear that the UK could not credibly adopt a net zero emissions target unless it invests in carbon capture and undersea storage. Does the Secretary of State plan to extend the Tory manifesto's proposals on CCUS plants to Scotland so that we can create and deliver a clean growth structure?

Alok Sharma: I certainly agree that CCUS is going to be essential to successfully tackling climate change. The hon. Gentleman talks about innovation funding for Scotland. I can tell him that £4.8 million is supporting the development of Project Acorn, which is a CCUS project based in north-east Scotland.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): For over 40 years, Jim Hall Sports has been at the heart of Bramhall village. However, the future of the shop is in doubt after Nike's decision to terminate its supply agreements with smaller independent shops. This follows years of annual rises in the amounts that independent retailers have needed to sell to hold on to their merchandise account. It is a move that is a harbinger of the end of many independent stores in an already pressurised high street market. What discussions has my hon. Friend had with sports giants such as Nike to ensure that Jim Hall's and other independent sports shops continue to have a future on our high streets?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): I thank my hon. Friend for sticking up for small businesses in her constituency. Large suppliers of consumer products, especially those who are leaders in their field, have a responsibility to treat retailers fairly and transparently, regardless of their size. If they think they are being unfairly treated, they could go to the Competition and Markets Authority. Contractual arrangements are between two private companies. However, we will support our high streets through the towns fund and the establishment of the high street taskforce.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Coronavirus is impacting on every aspect of work, from the cost to employers to the cost to workers. The Health Secretary has said that employers should view isolation as sick leave, but the law does not state that. Even if that was so, those on zero-hours contracts and in insecure work are unlikely to have sickness cover, and statutory sick pay does not pay for the first three days, meaning that those with little means have to choose between health and hardship—an issue I raised with the Health Minister a month ago. So what discussions has the Business Secretary had with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that workers are financially protected to stop the risk of spreading coronavirus?

Alok Sharma: The hon. Lady is right: this is a very serious issue, which affects individuals and challenges businesses. Those who do not qualify for statutory sick

pay, including those who are self-employed, may be able to claim universal credit or new-style employment and support allowance.

T5. [901071] **Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Lithium is set to become one of the most sought after minerals in the world. Recent confirmation of significant deposits means that Cornwall is well placed to enable the UK to have its own secure domestic and sustainable supply of this vital mineral. Not only will that help to level up the Cornish economy, but it will put the UK at a global competitive advantage. Will the Minister ensure that the Government do everything possible to enable us to make the most of this opportunity, and would he like to come to Cornwall to see the work that is going on?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Nadhim Zahawi): I had the pleasure, with my hon. Friend, of meeting Cornish Lithium recently, and it was made clear that lithium extraction provides an excellent opportunity to contribute to our efforts to level up Cornwall, as well as securing our net zero objectives. I thank him for the invitation. I would be delighted to visit Cornwall.

T2. [901067] **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): In Scotland, 204 free cash machines closed last year. Alongside access to local banks and post office services being cut, that is having a hugely detrimental impact on high streets and small businesses in our towns, which are already struggling. Will the Secretary of State ensure that the Government act now and introduce legislation to protect access to cash, local banking and post office services on our high streets, so that our small businesses and high streets can survive and thrive?

Alok Sharma: We are committed to supporting the retail sector, and we are working closely with the industry through the Retail Sector Council. As the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), noted in reply to a question earlier, we are supporting high streets with the £1 billion future high streets fund.

T6. [901072] **Suzanne Webb** (Stourbridge) (Con): Both I and Andy Street are campaigning for a gigafactory to be located in the urban west midlands, close to the heart of car manufacturing. The factory would make the region a world leader in green vehicle technology. Will the Minister support that vision, and what steps can we take to ensure there is further investment in green technology in the west midlands?

Alok Sharma: We are committed to securing investment for a UK gigafactory to support electrical vehicle manufacturing. Indeed, last week, I met Andy Street and Ralf Speth, who is the chief executive officer of Jaguar Land Rover, to discuss their thoughts on this matter. We recognise the strength of the west midlands, where £138 million has already been invested in the UK Battery Industrialisation Centre scheduled to open near Coventry this summer.

T4. [901069][R] **Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for disability, I have been receiving

representations from entrepreneurs with disabilities who state that they face many more challenges in accessing business loans. Will the Secretary of State speak with colleagues in the Treasury and make sure that there is a strategy to address that, so that a truly inclusive economy can be achieved?

Alok Sharma: The hon. Lady talks about support for business. We provide that through small start-up loans and the British Business Bank, but I or one of my colleagues would be happy to have a discussion with her on the specific issue she raises.

T7. [901073] **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): Are the current bunch of Ministers crusading Conservatives? With 73% of small businesses reporting that they are over-regulated, do Ministers wake up every day thinking about how they can reduce taxation and regulation on business—particularly small businesses? In other words, do they accept that it is only with entrepreneurs that we can create wealth in this society?

Alok Sharma: My right hon. Friend speaks from experience, having been a business Minister in the past. We are absolutely committed to making sure that we reduce burdensome regulation and red tape, but we need to make sure that we stick with the protections that are there for employees.

T9. [901075] **Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Following the conviction of two ticket touts in Leeds last week for fraud, what discussions has the Minister had with his colleagues in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport about including financial harm in the online harms White Paper?

Alok Sharma: I will make sure that my colleagues and I have the discussion. Perhaps the hon. Lady would like to share with my office the details of that case.

T8. [901074] **Theo Clarke** (Stafford) (Con): As a former small business owner, may I ask the Minister what steps he is taking to enable more women to start and grow their own businesses, to help generate more local jobs in my constituency and across the country?

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Last week, I co-chaired the Rose review board, which is overseeing the progress made in delivering on the initiatives from that review. The Treasury has launched the investing in women code, which to date has 22 signatories from across the financial services industry. I look forward to working with my colleagues in government and business to drive forward this important agenda.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): Tidal's Store in my constituency is paying a high amount of business rates—proportionately more than the local retail park down the road—which it says is putting it at a disadvantage. Will the Minister have a word with his Treasury colleagues about reforming business rates for small businesses such as Tidal's?

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. I know that that is something that exercises high streets up and down the country. The Treasury is looking at this and reviewing business rates as a whole.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): When I was in business years ago, it came to something when Ríkisútvarpið in Iceland and Nederlandse Omroep Stichting in Holland paid quicker than the BBC. What can my hon. Friend do to ensure that large businesses pay smaller businesses quickly and on time?

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. We will be strengthening the Small Business Commissioner's powers. We already have a tough approach to large companies that do not comply with the payment practices and reporting duty. We are strengthening and reforming the prompt payment code and moving administration to the Small Business Commissioner. The business basics fund competition encourages SMEs to utilise payment technology and boost productivity, and the winners will be announced in April.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Local crofters in Melness support the proposal to establish a vertical space launch facility in Sutherland, and they have written to the Prime Minister to tell him that. Does the Secretary of State agree that that would be good for the local economy and that the UK has a huge opportunity in terms of launching satellites for other countries that do not have launch facilities?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Amanda Solloway): I thank the hon. Member for that question. We have united Departments across government to develop a UK space strategy, which will help the UK lead the way in this fast-growing area and create thousands of jobs across the country. Our space strategy will support cutting-edge space science and technologies and foster world-leading British innovation.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): Nearly half the core research and development budget is spent in just three cities—Oxford, Cambridge and London—and yet for every pound of private investment that such spending leverages in London, we get £3 in the east midlands and £5 in the west midlands. Does the Minister agree that, if we are going to level up, we need a fairer division of spending on R&D?

Alok Sharma: As I said in answer to an earlier question, I absolutely want to see levelling up, and I want to see money put into centres of excellence around the country.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Secretary of State to his role. I enjoyed working with him in his previous job, and I am sure he will do a very good job in this Department. Is he aware of the dire situation of businesses in my constituency because the workshop of the world—China—has closed for business? There is no supply chain, and manufacturing companies up and down the country are in a dire situation. This is a crisis caused by coronavirus, and we have not stepped up to the plate yet to face the measure of this terrible disaster.

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank the hon. Member for his question, but he is wrong. We have stood up a very important group within the Department that is working with the automotive sector, the retail sector and others that are impacted by China's supply chain problems. We continue to monitor the situation closely, as well as the critical infrastructure that keeps the UK's lights on and the UK economy powering ahead.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that one of the best ways to level up the great British high street with the internet would be to allow our high street shops to choose when they open?

Paul Scully: I know that my hon. Friend has looked at extending the hours of the Malvern tourist information centre. The Government have reviewed this issue several times. There are strongly held views on both sides. We believe that the current rules represent a fair compromise between those seeking reduced opening hours and those seeking greater liberalisation.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): At the same time as the Government have re-announced subsidies for onshore wind, Scottish Forestry has revealed that 13.9 million trees have been cut down for wind farms on its land. Does the Minister share my concern at those acts of economic vandalism? Does he believe that it is in the economic and environmental interests of this country to tear down trees, cut up peatland and erect steel structures on pristine landscapes in the vain hope that we can change the climate?

The Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth (Kwasi Kwarteng): I am always very interested in the right hon. Gentleman's contributions on this subject. We should look at the details of actual deforestation, but he must not allow himself to get distracted from the big picture. The deployment of offshore wind has been a huge success for the UK. As the Secretary of State said, the price per megawatt hour has come down by two thirds and renewable energy is absolutely at the centre of our strategy to reach net zero carbon.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): In 2016, the United States became a net exporter of liquefied natural gas. In 2019, the United States became a net exporter of all oil products: both crude and refined. To diversify the UK's energy risk, is it not time that the Government started to interact with the United States, perhaps as part of a trade deal, to import both gas and oil from the United States?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I met the newly appointed US Energy Secretary a couple of weeks ago and we work very closely with the United States. Of course, this week we published our terms for our negotiation for a free trade agreement with that great country.

Recent Violence in India

12.31 pm

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on recent violence in India and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act.

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will respond to this urgent question as the Foreign Secretary is in Turkey today.

The British high commission in New Delhi and our extensive diplomatic network of deputy high commissions across India are monitoring closely the recent violence in India and developments around the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019. The events in Delhi last week were very concerning, and the situation is still tense. The death of one protester is one too many. We urge restraint from all parties and trust that the Indian Government will address the concerns of people of all religions in India. We also condemn any incidents of violence, persecution or targeting of people based on religion or belief, wherever it happens in the world.

India has a proud history of inclusive government and religious tolerance. Its secular constitution, which guarantees equality before the law, has been an exemplar of inclusive democracy. After his re-election, I note that Prime Minister Modi promised to continue this under the guiding principles of

“together with all, development for all and trust for all”.

These shared strengths and values are central to the governance of both our countries. It is a central message of our foreign policy that societies are stronger and safer when we embrace our diversity rather than fear it.

Many people have made it clear that they have concerns about the Government of India recently signing into law the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, which expedites the path to citizenship for Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Parsis and Christians, but notably not Muslims or minority sects. The UK Government also has concerns about the potential impact of the legislation. It is because of our close relationship with the Government of India that we are able to discuss difficult issues with them and make clear our concerns where we have them, including on the rights of minorities.

Most recently, my ministerial colleague Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon raised these concerns about the impact of the CAA with a senior member of India's Ministry of External Affairs on 25 February. Officials from the British high commission in New Delhi also raised our concerns about the potential impact of the CAA and the police response to the protests with the state government of Uttar Pradesh on 7 February. Our former high commissioner in New Delhi, Sir Dominic Asquith, also raised the issue with the Government of India in January, as did Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials with the Indian high commission in London.

More broadly, the UK engages with India at all levels, including union and state governments, and with non-governmental organisations to build capacity and share expertise to promote human rights for all. We will continue to follow events closely and to raise our concerns when we have them.

Mr Mahmood: I find the hon. Gentleman's words rather facile. We have brought him to the Dispatch Box. I raised the issue with the Leader of the House on Thursday, and the Minister is here now. This urgent question concerns the sickening violence against Muslims that we have seen in India in recent weeks following the proposals in the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019. The CAA enables undocumented migrants from neighbouring countries to seek Indian citizenship, provided that they meet one condition: they are not Muslim. This is the first such law to have been passed in India since its independence. Next will come a national register of citizens, and undocumented Muslim migrants will automatically be excluded, held in concentration camps and identified for deportation.

Through such laws, Prime Minister Modi is turning a hateful nationalistic slogan into brutality. He recently said, “Hinduon ka Hindustan,” which is literally translated as, “India for the Hindus.” The CAA has generated nationwide protests by Muslims and secular Hindus, prompting politicians from the ultra-nationalist Bharatiya Janata party to demand that the sectarian hate mobs hit back. Recently in Delhi, more than 40 people were killed by mobs that attacked Muslim homes and families, but the authorities took no notice. As a result, in recent weeks, dozens of Muslims have been dragged out of their homes, burned, or beaten to death in the streets by mobs. Thousands of people have lost their livelihoods. All the while, the Indian police look on passively, and Modi cynically counts the benefits of electoral success.

For those who support India and want to see it take its rightful place as one of the global leaders of the 21st century, with a place on the United Nations Security Council, it is sickening to see such a descent into hatred and mob rule. What are the Government doing to take India off this path and to provide protection for its Muslim population? Has the Minister raised the issue with his Indian counterpart, and has he threatened to raise it at Commonwealth and UN level? If India behaves like a state with no regard for human rights, the rule of law or freedom of religion, it must urgently be made to face the consequences of its behaviour.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am expecting to run this urgent question for up to 40 minutes.

Nigel Adams: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that we deplore what we have seen over the last few weeks, and we condemn the violence that has been recorded and broadcast. We have raised, and do raise, concerns with the Indian Government, especially over such matters. As I said, we have concerns about the impact of the CAA, and my colleague, Lord Ahmad, has raised them with the Ministry of External Affairs. We continue that dialogue. As recently as mid-February, officials from the British high commission raised our concerns about the impact of the CAA, and particularly about the police response to those protests with the state government of Uttar Pradesh. I assure the hon. Gentleman that our dialogue with the Indian Government is ongoing.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend for his responses so far, particularly his remark that one protester who is killed is one too many.

[Bob Blackman]

He will be aware that it is not just Muslims who have been killed; Hindus have also been killed as part of the riots. Will he confirm that there have been 514 arrests following those riots, and that the police have organised 330 separate meetings with different communities to bring them together and calm the situation down? Will he commend that action to restore peace and tranquillity to Delhi?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend takes a keen interest in these affairs. I would commend and applaud any action that attempts to take the heat out of the severe tensions over the CAA that currently exist in parts of India.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): There is a lot of agreement across the House, and I commend the Minister on his statement, with which I agreed, as far as it went—we need to be clear that we can go a lot further. The situation has been, as we have heard, occasioned by a deliberate Indian Government policy of targeting Muslims with the Citizenship (Amendment) Act. In the short term, there is a real role for the UK Government—this was not mentioned in the statement—to build on the RESIST Government communication framework, as it is obvious that online disinformation is being used in India to inflame tensions. I commend the Government Communication Service and the Cabinet Office on this work. I think that the UK is in a position to undertake a real assessment of the online actors, including malign actors—this is aside from Indian Government policy, which is another issue, and I urge the Minister to step up efforts on dialogue regarding that—as there are online efforts that could be made against that sort of disinformation, as people are at risk of further violence.

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman makes a sensible and important point. I am pleased that he welcomes the report. Any measures, whether attempting to clamp down on online disinformation or those that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) raised, are welcome. We are in constant contact on these issues, and we know how important this is to Members of Parliament and their constituents, who may have family in the area. I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's comments.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend to his new position. Will he confirm that he will use his high office and every power that he has to make sure that Members' concerns are relayed to the Indian authorities, particularly given that the brutality seems to have been meted out by those who should enforce the law, as was recently shown in BBC coverage.

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I alluded to our concerns about some of the police brutality that was meted out. We have long regarded protest as a key part of any democratic society. Democratic Governments must have the power to enforce law and order when a protest crosses the line into illegality, but we also encourage all states to ensure that their domestic laws are enforced in line with all international standards.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): In the past five years, Narendra Modi's BJP Government have chosen a path of systematic discrimination, whether the abrogation of article 35A in Kashmir or the citizenship

law. Calling the recent violence “community clashes” seeks to normalise far more sinister events. India is now controlled by a Hindutva supremacist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh ideology, with strong historic links to the Nazi party. The current Prime Minister of India was a member of the RSS. What steps is our Prime Minister taking to call out that discriminatory practice at the heart of the Indian Government?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Lady makes a powerful point. We are in constant contact with the Indian Government. I mentioned in my statement that we have concerns about the impact of the CAA legislation, particularly on Muslims, and she is right to raise that. Rest assured that, through our close relationship with India, we are able to raise those concerns with that Government, especially in a live situation.

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con): The United Kingdom can be justifiably proud of being a world leader in matters relating to freedom of confession. Can the Minister confirm that Her Majesty's Government will call for a thorough investigation of all and any abuses that have been perpetrated and use their influence to call for restraint?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend makes a sensible point, and it is because we have influence with the Indian Government that we are in a good position to do that. We have close contacts, and we actively promote—I think we are a world leader in this—matters relating to freedom of religion and belief. Ministers and senior officials raise individual cases and highlight practices and laws that discriminate against people on that basis.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Incited mob violence in Delhi on the basis of someone's faith brings back painful personal memories, as a religious minority, of the 1984 genocide of Sikhs while I was studying in India. We must learn from history, not be fooled by those whose insidious aim is to divide society and are hellbent on killing people and destroying religious places in the name of religion. What message has the Minister given to his Indian counterparts that the persecution of Indian Muslims, many of whom have protested peacefully against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, is utterly intolerable; that the police cannot stand idly by or, worse still, be complicit, as is alleged by many victims and social activists; and that the perpetrators must feel the full force of the law?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman speaks very powerfully from personal experience. It is absolutely essential that we speak up when we believe that abuses have taken place. When protest crosses the line into illegality, as I mentioned, the Government need to act within all domestic and international laws to make sure that those laws are enforced. He is absolutely right to raise these issues, and we are constantly talking at ministerial and official levels with the Government of India about our concerns, particularly regarding the CAA.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): I am speaking on behalf of a great number of constituents who have presented me with very grave concerns about what is happening in India. Does my hon. Friend agree that clamping down on any human rights abuses will always be a central part of UK foreign policy?

Nigel Adams: That is absolutely right. We take the lead on this issue around the world and we are well regarded. This is a core part of our foreign policy, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that in the House on behalf of his constituents.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): We know that there is a pattern of behaviour and that this is just the latest example of religious intolerance in India. When Prime Minister Modi welcomed Donald Trump a couple of weeks ago, we saw the two of them embracing each other and scrambling to do a trade agreement. In the scramble for a post-Brexit trade deal, what reassurances can the Minister give that we will not be doing the same and that we will raise these cases at the highest levels of government and not ignore human rights when it comes to doing trade deals?

Nigel Adams: While trade is vital for our economy and future prosperity, this in no way compromises the United Kingdom's commitment to holding human rights at the core of our foreign policy. I guarantee the hon. Gentleman that we will not pursue trade to the exclusion of human rights.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights recently introduced an intervention plea in the Supreme Court of India about the CAA; she has been given a brush-off by the Indian Government. What are we doing to bolster the position of the UN commissioner?

Nigel Adams: I am aware of the intervention to which my hon. Friend refers. I assure him that we raise our concerns privately and regularly with the Government of India. We will continue to engage with them on a full range of human rights matters and we raise our concerns when we have them, particularly at the current time.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): As the BBC recently reported, the latest outbreak of violence in Delhi is very worrying, as there is evidence that the police are complicit in and, indeed, encouraging violence against Muslims. What are the Government doing to make sure that they are talking to their counterparts in Delhi to ensure that Muslim's lives there are safe?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Member raises a very good point. Any allegation of human rights abuses is deeply disturbing, and the violence that we saw was incredibly concerning. I assure the House that we have made it clear that those incidents must be investigated thoroughly, promptly and transparently.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): The fact that the Indian Government have felt able to pass this law and some of the responses that we have seen to it are deeply distressing. Will my hon. Friend not only confirm that he will continue to raise this at the highest level but make a commitment that Foreign Office staff will now start planning how we can act to raise the pressure on this issue before there is any further escalation, rather than reacting in response to it?

Nigel Adams: I know that my hon. Friend has great experience of foreign affairs, having worked in the Department, and she raises a very good and crucial

point. Because we have that close relationship with India through our officials and at a ministerial level, we can have that dialogue. She makes a very sensible point about being pre-emptive rather than reactive.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Citizenship (Amendment) Act and the violence it has precipitated would be concerning enough if it was a single isolated act, but we all know that it is not; it comes on the heels of Modi's Government's actions in relation to Kashmir and the implementation in Assam of a national register of citizens. It is beginning to look like part of a course of conduct designed to marginalise the Muslim population in India. India is part of the Commonwealth. What are we doing through that forum, alongside the bilateral representations that I trust we are making?

Nigel Adams: The right hon. Gentleman rightly mentions the NRC in Assam. I know that there are concerns in that area as well. Through our network of high commissioners, we continually assess that situation. I can get back to the right hon. Gentleman in writing on action through the Commonwealth.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): On the intervention application to the Indian Supreme Court by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, does the Minister believe that this is an internal sovereign issue, or does he believe that it is an international issue, given that India is a signatory to a plethora of international law obligations?

Nigel Adams: We raise these issues directly and have done so privately. I am aware of what the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has filed, but the UK Government intend to pursue our policy of raising issues directly with the Government of India.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): In October 1984, Delhi witnessed the genocide of Sikhs in their thousands under Congress rule. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that all ethnic and religious minorities in India can feel safe, secure and free from persecution?

Nigel Adams: All minorities in India deserve that protection, and I can assure the hon. Lady that we constantly remind our counterparts at official and ministerial levels of their responsibilities in that regard.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): In my constituency, families of Indian origin have wonderful relations with each other, whether they are Hindu, Sikh or Muslim, so it is heartbreaking to see the violence in India. Is the Minister thinking about how we can use all our policies, including our aid policies, to encourage equally good relationships between communities in India itself?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend will be aware that the UK Government have several projects in India, though we do not provide funding directly to the Government of India. I know that this can be helpful and that our intervention is appreciated in many areas.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I echo the Minister's tribute to the constitution of India. Since it was drafted under the leadership of Dr B. R. Ambedkar after independence, it has been admired around the world for its commitment to equality irrespective of religion. Does he share my sadness that the Citizenship (Amendment) Act is such a decisive move away from that principle because, as he has explained, for some it makes citizenship dependent on their religion?

Nigel Adams: I do share the right hon. Gentleman's concerns. The UK Government have broad concerns about the Act, which is why we are engaging directly with the Government. He is right to raise this matter because it is a huge concern.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Those of us with significant Indian Muslim communities will have seen videos showing shocking orchestrated sectarian violence. May I encourage the Minister to invite the Indian high commissioner to his office to share with him the deep concern of many of our constituents about their families and friends in India? If there is one silver lining in this very dark cloud it is what one Gujarati Muslim said to me, which is that he and his family now value more than ever the pluralism and safety across faiths that this country provides.

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend speaks with great knowledge and passion on all these matters and is right to raise this issue. I will speak to my ministerial colleague, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, who I know has a close relationship with the high commissioner. I am sure that this matter has been raised, but on behalf of my hon. Friend and his constituents, I will ensure that Lord Ahmad has a meeting with the high commissioner shortly.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Many of my constituents have raised concerns about the ongoing situation in India and Jammu and Kashmir. There is something the Minister could do to be of assistance. There will be many people within the UK Visas and Immigration system awaiting a decision, including people who have been through religious persecution already. What advice would he give to his colleagues in the Home Office on how those cases should be dealt with and will he ensure that the advice on India and Jammu and Kashmir is updated to reflect the ongoing situation?

Nigel Adams: We regularly update our advice on Kashmir via the FCO website and we encourage people to take close notice of that. I am sure that my colleagues in the Home Office will have noted the hon. Lady's question and will make sure she gets a follow-up.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Our close relationship with India will ensure that our concerns on this matter are heard. What representations have the Government made to the Government of India to ensure that they, their states and their agents always act in compliance with international law?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend raises a good point. It is because we have a close relationship with India that we can raise our concerns at all levels with the Government of India. Most recently, just over a week ago, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon raised our concerns about the CAA directly with India's Ministry of External Affairs.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): In August 2019, the Indian Government stripped Muslim-majority Jammu and Kashmir of its autonomous status. In December, it passed the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, which provides a path to citizenship for all migrant minorities except Muslims and creates a national register of citizens, forcing Indians to provide documents to prove their citizenship, which many poorer Indians do not have and many Muslims will not be able to get. Does the Minister accept that the recent violence in Delhi, which has been whipped up by BJP politicians and has led to dozens of deaths, is just the latest targeted assault on Muslims by the Modi Government?

Nigel Adams: The UK Government have deep concerns about the escalation that the hon. Lady refers to. She mentioned the NRC, which is currently enacted in the state of Assam. We have not received any confirmation from the Government of India that it will be expanded India-wide, but she is right to raise concerns, because millions of people could be affected and will be very concerned about this policy.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the UK leads the way on the global stage on freedom of religion and belief?

Nigel Adams: I do indeed. We actively promote the importance of freedom of religion and belief and we combat discrimination on the basis of religious identity through our diplomatic activity and through the UN and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Recently, delegates from Nottingham's Indian diaspora came to see me and challenged me—quite legitimately—over our special connection and relationship with India, which they said gave us a responsibility to speak out against what we have seen in Kashmir and with the CAA. The Minister has talked about the contact between our Government and the Government of India, but he has not said what impact that has had. He has detailed his strategy. What evidence does he have that it is working?

Nigel Adams: As I have said numerous times, we are constantly making representations where we believe there are human rights abuses. On Kashmir, as is well known, our position is that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting political resolution while taking into account the wishes of Kashmiri people. The Indian Government take notice of what the UK Government say, and that dialogue will continue.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): The situation in Jammu and Kashmir is of particular concern to my constituents, many of whom have family and friends in the region. This is obviously a complex issue, but will my hon. Friend agree to put more pressure on the Indian and Pakistani Governments to take action to find a resolution that results in peace in Jammu and Kashmir?

Nigel Adams: Indeed. My ministerial colleagues talk to their colleagues in not just the Indian but the Pakistani Government. I can assure my hon. Friend and his

constituents that that dialogue continues and that we consistently press for channels of dialogue to remain open. We believe that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting political resolution, and we want to encourage the pace and scope of their dialogue.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): Will the Minister join me in rejecting the language of riots, clashes, protest and communal violence? This is, in fact, a continuation of sustained and systemic Hindutva violence waged on the Muslim and many minority ethnic communities in India that is sanctioned by Modi's BJP Government.

Nigel Adams: The UK Government have long regarded protest as a legitimate means of raising issues and as part of democratic society, but any allegations of human rights abuse are very concerning, and we believe that they should be investigated thoroughly, promptly and transparently.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Can the Minister share with us the reason why the Indian Government have excluded Muslims from the Citizenship (Amendment) Act? Does he agree that legislation should never discriminate on the basis of faith?

Nigel Adams: I can assure the hon. Lady that such legislation does give us cause for concern, especially for the Muslim community, and we make those points very clearly when we meet our counterparts.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Was the hon. Gentleman not late in attending?

Paul Bristow: I was, yes.

Mr Speaker: In that case, we will leave it until next time.

Coronavirus

1.1 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement about the Government's coronavirus action plan.

The situation facing the country is increasingly serious. Globally and at home, the number of cases continues to rise. As of 9 am today, there were 51 confirmed cases in the UK, and it is becoming more likely that we will see widespread transmission in this country. Our approach is to plan for the worst and work for the best. Yesterday I attended a Cobra meeting chaired by the Prime Minister, during which we finalised our four-part action plan to contain, delay, research and mitigate the virus. The plan has been jointly agreed by the UK Government and the devolved Administrations. Copies have been sent to Members of both Houses and made available in hard copy.

The plan is driven by the science and guided by the expert recommendations of the four UK chief medical officers and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies. It sets out what we know so far about the virus and the disease that it causes, what long-term planning we have undertaken to prepare for a pandemic, what actions we have taken so far in response to the current outbreak, and, crucially, the role that the public can play in supporting our response, both now and in the future.

The UK is well prepared for infectious disease outbreaks of this kind. The international data continue to indicate that for most people, this disease is mild and the vast majority recover fully. We have responded to a wide range of disease outbreaks in the recent past, and the NHS has been preparing for a pandemic virus for well over a decade. We have world-class expertise to make sense of the emerging data; we have a strong base on which to build; and, while covid-19 is a new virus, we have adapted our response to take account of that fact.

Our plan sets out a phased response to the outbreak. Phase 1 is to contain, and it is the phase that we are currently in. Contain is about detecting the early cases, following up close contacts, and preventing the disease from taking hold in this country for as long as is reasonably possible. That approach also buys time for the NHS to ramp up its preparations. The scientific advice is that if the number of global cases continues to rise, especially in Europe, we may not be able to contain the virus indefinitely.

At that point, we will activate the delay phase of our plan. Delay is about slowing the spread, lowering the peak impact of the disease, and pushing it away from the winter season. We are mindful of scientific advice that reacting too early or overreacting carries its own risks, so, subject to the primary goal of keeping people safe, we will seek to minimise social and economic disruption.

The third part of the plan is research. Research has been ongoing since we first identified covid-19, and I pay tribute to the scientists at Public Health England who were among the first in the world to sequence its genome. Research is not just about the development of a vaccine, which we are actively pursuing but which will be many months away at the earliest. It is also about

[*Matt Hancock*]

understanding what actions will lessen the impact of the coronavirus, including what drugs and treatments—existing and new—will help those who are already sick.

The fourth phase is mitigate. We will move to this phase if the virus becomes established in the UK population. At that point it would be impossible to prevent widespread transmission, so the emphasis will be on caring for those who are most seriously ill and keeping essential services running at a time when large parts of the workforce may be off sick. Our plans include not just the most likely case, but the reasonable worst case.

We will identify and support the most vulnerable. If necessary, we will take some of the actions set out in today's plan to reduce the impact of absentees and to lessen the impact on our economy and supply chains. We prepare for the worst and work for the best. We commit to ensuring that the agencies responsible for tackling this outbreak are properly resourced and have the people, equipment and medicines that they need and that any new laws that they need are brought forward as and when required.

This is a national effort. We need everyone to listen to and act on the official medical advice. We need employers to prioritise the welfare of their staff. And the single most important thing that everyone can do to help—I make no apologies for repeating this—is to use tissues when they cough or sneeze, and to wash their hands more often. That is in their interest, their families' interest and the national interest.

We will get through this, and everyone has a part to play. I commend this statement to the House.

1.7 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): May I apologise to you, Mr Speaker, and to the House for being a few minutes late? I had a problem with my printer when I was trying to print the Secretary of State's statement. I thank him for advance sight of the statement, and, indeed, for advance sight of the action plan this morning. Let me also record my thanks for the briefing that the Leader of the Opposition and I received yesterday from departmental officials, the chief medical officer and the Government chief scientific adviser. I believe that the chief medical officer will brief parliamentarians later today, and I think that that is a very welcome initiative.

The Government's strategy to contain then delay, research and then mitigate has our endorsement, but may I ask the Secretary of State for some specific clarifications? The first relates to containment and self-isolation. The Prime Minister said today—as, indeed, the Secretary of State has said before—that workers who self-isolate are considered to be on sick leave. Can the Secretary of State confirm that those who need to self-isolate will not need to visit a GP to obtain a sick note, given that the Government's advice is not to visit a GP? As he will know, 2 million workers on low pay or insecure contracts in the gig economy do not even qualify for statutory sick pay. He will also know that those who are receiving benefits are often asked to physically attend appointments. Can he guarantee that no financial sanction will be imposed if they are asked to self-isolate?

Does the Secretary of State accept that people should not be forced to make a choice between their health and avoiding financial hardship? We are told that he is considering emergency legislation. Will he introduce legislation to remove the barriers to self-isolation so that all workers can receive the sick pay that they deserve? That is in the interests of public health. If he introduces such legislation, we will help him to get it on to the statute book quickly. He could do it this week or he could do it next week, and we will support him. Let us give all workers the security that they deserve, so that they do not have to put their health ahead of their financial interests or vice versa.

More broadly on the NHS and social care, I want to look at the response of the NHS and the support that it will be given through the containment and mitigation phases. We know that around 80% of critical care beds were occupied last week. We know that the NHS is short of 100,000 staff, and we also know that staff working in the NHS, particularly those on the frontline such as GPs, need to be protected as well. Even if we take at face value the Government's insistence that they have provided the NHS with the resources to deliver the commitments of the long-term plan—we obviously disagree on this, but that is a debate for another time—we can surely all accept that covid-19 is going to lead to increased demand on trusts and the wider NHS. Every trust that sends a sample for testing has to pay for it to be couriered. Trusts are likely to take on more agency staff. If retired staff are encouraged to return to practice, the wage bill will increase. By the way, on retired staff, can the Secretary of State reassure us that protections and oversight will be in place, particularly around returning staff who, as we understand it, will not need to go through a revalidation process for their licence?

The Government have recognised that, as we move into the mitigation phase, non-urgent care may be delayed. I assume that means that trusts will be looking at cancelling elective surgery, which will result in waiting lists growing. Again, this will impact on trusts' finances. Will the Government provide an emergency funding increase for the NHS resource budget to support the NHS through this next challenging period? Directors of public health still do not know their public health allocations for the next financial year, which starts next month. This means that directors of public health could be cutting the nurse workloads they are responsible for commissioning at a time when those very nurses will be needed to deal with covid-19 cases. Will the right hon. Gentleman announce the public health allocations as a matter of urgency?

On social care, we know that many who are at risk from the virus are the elderly and those with chronic conditions. Social care is responsible for and has a duty of care to many of the people who are most vulnerable to the outbreak. What advice does the Secretary of State have for social care providers, and will extra resources be announced for social care services? On the emergency powers that he has briefed about, will he sit down with us and other Opposition parties to discuss the contents of that legislation?

On the global efforts to contain the virus, we know that disease knows no borders. We cannot build a wall or an iron curtain around these islands. Why, then, are the Government apparently walking away from the EU early warning and response system, which plays such a

vital role in pandemic preparations? We have been led to believe that No. 10 has overruled the Secretary of State on this. Also, to contain the virus internationally, countries with weaker health systems need to be supported as well; otherwise, we will not contain the virus. Can the Secretary of State update us on what help he is offering to the World Health Organisation on that front?

This is a serious time. Our constituents will be concerned, and many will be frightened. We will raise our concerns responsibly, but we offer to work constructively with the Government, because the public health interest and the safety of our constituents must always come first.

Matt Hancock: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the constructive approach he has taken from the start, and I will seek to address all the questions that he has raised. His first point was about statutory sick pay. For those who need to self-isolate for medical reasons to protect others, that counts as being off sick. They do not need to go to a GP, because there is a seven-day allowance for self-declaration. I hope that that addresses that point directly—*[Interruption.]* We keep all matters on this under review because, broadly, I agree with him on the principle that he has set out. On the NHS, he asked about resources. We have already increased resources to the NHS and we stand ready to do so if that is necessary.

The hon. Gentleman asked about doctors and revalidation. In legislation, we are proposing to make revalidation simpler. We will bring forward those measures, and of course we will engage with the Opposition on the potential measures as and when that is necessary.

On public health allocations, we have already been clear that the public health grant is going up in aggregate. As my right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary set out last week, we have seen a 4.4% real-terms increase in local authority budgets this year, and the social care budget is going up by £1 billion. I think that that takes into account the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised.

The hon. Gentleman also raised engagement with the World Health Organisation. We have supported the WHO with extra funding. On engaging with the EU, I have regular engagement with colleagues from across Europe, and some of the reports I have seen in the newspapers are not accurate, because the questions of engagement with the EU on matters of health security are a matter for the negotiations, as set out on Thursday in the negotiations document.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): I would like to commend the Health Secretary for the calm way in which he has been dealing with this crisis and for his very clear public messaging. He called me last Friday to tell me that there had been a coronavirus outbreak in my constituency. I would like to thank the staff at the Haslemere health centre for their extraordinary commitment in working over the weekend so that the health centre could be open again on Monday morning. This shows, however, that some of the people at greatest risk are our frontline health workers. One study in China showed that 7% of the people who got the virus in Wuhan were health workers. Will the Health Secretary confirm whether hospitals, GP surgeries, care homes and nursing homes have enough face masks, gloves and hand gel, and will he outline any other measures he is taking to ensure that NHS staff are kept safe?

Matt Hancock: My right hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point, and the answer to the question is yes. We are putting out further advice and guidance to the health system, to the NHS, to GPs and to hospitals today. That will go out from Keith Willett in the NHS.

On the point about the kit needed to keep health workers safe: yes, we are putting in place the actions to ensure that it is available at the right moment when it is needed. There are some GP surgeries that do not have that equipment yet, but we are putting in place the actions needed to ensure that they have it as and when it is needed. As my right hon. Friend knows, the number of cases right now is relatively small. It is 51, as of 9 o'clock this morning. The protective equipment is there, so that for each of these cases we can get right on to them, but if the virus becomes more widespread, of course more and more NHS settings right across the country are going to need that sort of equipment.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I welcome the plan, although I have to say that I would have welcomed receiving the briefing yesterday that the shadow Secretary of State mentioned, which I did not receive. The plan lays out a reasonable worst case scenario, and it is clear about the three time phases. Research is of course ongoing, but this will help to prepare the public for decisions that may have to be made down the line. At the moment, containment is based on self-isolation of cases, contacts and those who have travelled to risk areas, but with the spread elsewhere in the world, it is becoming harder to define risk areas. With regard to north Italy, the chief medical officer talked about those with underlying conditions perhaps interpreting the advice more stringently and not travelling, so will the Government either discuss with insurance companies or even consider legislation to make underlying conditions an acceptable reason to cancel a holiday, so that people can get their money back rather than putting themselves at risk?

I agree with the Secretary of State regarding asymptomatic workers and sick pay, but there are staff who have no sick pay in their contract, and some protection has to be given to them. He referred to the seven-day period for self-certification, but isolation is for 14 days, and we do not want people turning up at their GP surgery halfway through that period. Can that be looked at? One issue that I have come across is an employer telling a member of staff returning from a holiday in Tenerife that they should not come to work for two weeks, but the employer does not wish to pay them for that period. We need to look at that, even if it is not health advice but an employer stipulation expecting people to have no income.

As we move into delay, we see that children are not particularly vulnerable to catching this. However, as with other coronaviruses, they may well spread it. Do we have evidence for how much they contribute to transmission, as that will affect decisions on school closures?

What preparations are being made for the long haul? Previous coronavirus outbreaks have lasted not just for a few months but for over a year, so we could be dealing with this next winter. If we move into mitigation, the situation will reverse and it will be about protecting the vulnerable and early discharge to home care. That might require the changing of staff from hospitals and care

[*Dr Philippa Whitford*]

homes to work in the community, so are the Government in negotiations on such matters as legal responsibility and liability?

The Secretary of State quite rightly talked about what the public should be doing, but should we not already be thinking about stopping shaking hands and about working from home, if possible, without an economic impact? That would also help the climate emergency. Containment moves into delay without a border, so should we not be thinking about trying to get ahead of the curve?

Matt Hancock: We have been briefing colleagues as much as possible. Clearly, the CMOs' time is incredibly valuable at the moment. We have worked with the Scottish Government on this plan; it was signed off by both the First Minister and the CMO for Scotland. In fact, it has been developed with the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Government of Northern Ireland, so ultimately it is a multi-party plan.

The hon. Lady made the point about seven-day certification. That is indeed the sort of reason why we are holding this area under review and there is work ongoing, including on the points she has raised. She also asked about shaking hands. The medical advice is that the impact of shaking hands is negligible; what really matters is washing hands. Our public health advice will remain clear and based on the science—what matters, more than anything else, is that people wash their hands for 20 seconds or more, using soap and preferably hot water. That is the core of the public health advice.

The hon. Lady mentioned working from home. There is an incredibly important point about timing written into the plan. There are actions that we may need to take in future that it would not be appropriate to take now. We are not advising people to work from home now, but we do not rule out doing so in future if that might be more effective clinically, given the disruption it could cause.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I will let this statement run for about an hour, so let us help each other.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): With regard to the impact that coronavirus can have, the Secretary of State is right to balance the difference of health and the economy and I welcome his caution in that regard. I want to raise a point about small businesses. If coronavirus does become a more significant problem, are the Government considering making emergency loans available to otherwise good businesses? If not, will he ask other Departments whether they might consider that?

Matt Hancock: We are considering that; it is being led by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, in conjunction with the Treasury. The Chancellor will be making a statement today, ahead of the Budget on 11 March.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know that there is a system whereby those who are immunosuppressed are not required to sit in

crowded waiting rooms in hospital or A&E. That is in normal conditions, never mind the situation with covid-19. Yesterday evening, I attended Aintree Hospital with a patient who had just finished her first round of chemotherapy. Despite the chemo-aware system, she was told by the receptionist to sit in a very crowded waiting room, for a five-hour wait, because there was nowhere else to go. I stood in a corridor, between the front door and some sliding doors, to ensure that she was not subjected to that. How will the Secretary of State ensure that frontline staff who are not necessarily clinicians understand the increased danger to those individuals? Does each A&E and each hospital have a place where those people could wait safely? This is not good enough.

Matt Hancock: The answer is yes. Each A&E now has a pod in front of it, which we have funded since the outbreak of the virus, so that suspected cases do not need to go into the main A&E. That is to address exactly the sorts of problems that the hon. Lady raises.

Sir Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): Does contingency planning include steps to secure additional capacity in private hospitals, which often would lend themselves better to isolation of infectious patients?

Matt Hancock: The question how we deliver and who delivers NHS services is a matter for the NHS, and making sure that we use all the health facilities available is of course something that the NHS is considering.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that, for self-isolation to work, no individual, whatever their circumstances, should be out of pocket for doing the right thing? As my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) said, currently, millions of people who work in the gig economy and do not qualify for sick pay would be out of pocket for doing the right thing. Does the Secretary of State agree that solving this problem and giving people the confidence that they need to do the right thing by self-isolating is one of the most important things that he can do in the next few days, to ensure that we can continue with containment?

Matt Hancock: There is a huge number of things that we need to do in the next few days and, as I have said, this area is under review.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Across government, in different Departments, there are many people with healthcare experience and professionalism. For example, the Department for Work and Pensions has 3,000 trained professionals working on assessments. What conversations is my right hon. Friend having with other Secretaries of State to understand whether there could be access to those individuals so that they, too, could be on the frontline?

Matt Hancock: That is something we are absolutely willing to look at.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Last week, I asked the Secretary of State about the preparedness of NHS 111. In answer to a written question,

the Department said that it does not have the numbers for current staff. I understand that Dudley call centre alone is asking to recruit 150 new call handlers. How many call handlers are we looking for in addition to the current staffing levels for NHS 111, and when does he expect them to be fully trained and online?

Matt Hancock: We have increased the number by 500 already, and there are plans for more to come, as and when that becomes necessary.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): An increasing number of people are self-isolating, but they still require routine care. Are GPs providing that routine care, and what advice is being given to GPs on whether they should wear masks, and whether they should visit a patient at home or get them to come to the surgery and so on?

Matt Hancock: We do not want people who suspect they have coronavirus to go to their GP; we want them to do this via NHS 111. Further to my earlier point about being able to self-validate for sick pay for seven days, they can of course then do that by phone and get an email confirmation, should they need to, to extend that to the full 14 days. Of course, as well as tackling coronavirus, the NHS must do business as usual. We are increasing the amount that people can do over the phone, Skype and other forms of telemedicine. That could be increasingly important if there is widespread concern about communicable diseases.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure continuity of social care, both in care homes and for care given at home, given the problems and workforce implications arising from coronavirus?

Matt Hancock: We have a huge amount of work under way, including looking at what we can do to ensure that people can get support in care homes. It is not just about the staff, of course; elderly people in care homes are, according to the data, among those most vulnerable to the disease. The care home element of our plan is incredibly important and we will be providing more details in the coming days.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): It is very important that both the resolution and the management of the crisis are based on the best possible science, and I join the Secretary of State's tribute to the UK scientists, who are among the most experienced and best qualified in the world. Have UK scientists been part of the World Health Organisation teams deployed to Iran and China? Does the Government's chief scientific adviser attend the Cobra meetings? Can the Secretary of State update me on the question, about which I wrote to him on Thursday, when we can expect a bedside test to be deployed in this country and made available around the world?

Matt Hancock: We are, of course, involved in the World Health Organisation missions and in some direct bilateral missions. I have repeatedly signed off on support for more UK experts to go out around the world. The

chief scientific adviser is, of course, at all the Cobra meetings on this, whether they are chaired by me or by the Prime Minister.

My right hon. Friend's point on the bedside test is incredibly important. We are currently engaged with just over a dozen companies to try to come up with a bedside test, instead of having to take a swab from the back of your throat, Mr Speaker—should you have the misfortune to fall ill—having it sent away and brought back. Working with UK companies to get a bedside test that can be done on the premises is an incredibly important part of the diagnostic mission surrounding this disease.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Will staff in community settings be issued with protective hazmat suits and masks?

Matt Hancock: We have extensive stockpiles of personal protective equipment. We are not distributing that at this moment because we have to distribute it at the right time. Each individual case can be dealt with at the moment, because they are relatively few, by those who are expert in using that kit. Of course community staff, as well as primary care staff and hospital staff, will be involved in the distribution of that equipment as and when appropriate.

Robert Lorgan (High Peak) (Con): Last week, there was a confirmed coronavirus case in Buxton, which led to the temporary closure of a medical centre and a school. Unfortunately, several national newspapers inaccurately reported that Buxton was a town on lockdown. Several local hotels have now reported booking cancellations as a result. Does the Secretary of State agree that the situation calls for responsible journalism and calm reporting of the facts? Will he join me in encouraging people to visit Buxton, Britain's best spa town?

Matt Hancock: Yes. I do not have to check with the chief medical officer before telling you, Mr Speaker, that I love going to Buxton, which is a great place to visit. My hon. Friend makes a serious point. As I said in my statement, there is scientific advice against moving too soon or overreacting, as there is against moving too slowly or not reacting strongly enough. We need to take the measures that are necessary to protect the public.

On taking measures that do not protect the public, the advice is that all of us in a position of responsibility whose communications are heard widely, whether we are Members of this House or members of the media, have a duty of responsibility, because how this is communicated will have a direct impact on how well we as a country cope with this outbreak.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Hospital cleaners and porters keep us safe, so will the Government increase SSP to full pay for all staff forced to self-isolate? Low-paid workers in our NHS should not be financially penalised for doing the right thing.

Matt Hancock: As I said, we are keeping the rules on SSP under review. As we directly employ people in the NHS, I am having a conversation about it with the chief executive of the NHS.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): The Secretary of State will know there are two confirmed cases in Gloucestershire, and I put on record my thanks to the public health professionals who have dealt with those cases in a professional, calm and considered manner.

My specific question is about the action the Department for Work and Pensions will take for those members of the public who, whether because of business downturn or because of self-isolation, have to access the benefits system. Will frontline DWP staff and systems accommodate the fact that self-isolation, as the Secretary of State says, should be treated as an illness and that no inappropriate sanctions should be applied?

Matt Hancock: We are absolutely clear that that is the rule, and I frequently talk to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about this matter.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Following the outbreak at Willow Bank Infant School, will the Secretary of State update the House on the work he is undertaking with the Department for Education, local authorities and schools to help contain the outbreak?

Matt Hancock: The broader point is that it is very important that schools do not close if they are not advised to close. Again, it is about following the medical advice. If there is no epidemiological reason to close, a school should not be closing.

As of 11 am today, I understand that 10 schools are closed. Seven of the 14 schools that were reported yesterday as having closed are now open, so this is a dynamic situation. The DFE is doing a fantastic job, and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards, who has been working night and day to make sure that, where possible, children are at school.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): My right hon. Friend will recall that I raised the issue of motorway service stations a couple of weeks ago. Coming down this week, I still did not see any signage about the health precautions that can be taken. May I urge him to investigate whether he can buy up advertising space in lavatory areas to make sure the message is clear so that people understand the hygiene steps to take?

Matt Hancock: That is an important point. We are launching an enhanced communications programme tomorrow, and I will check with my team whether it includes adverts in motorway service stations.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Rural Wales has a high percentage of self-employed people, and data from the Office for National Statistics suggests that 23% of households in Gwynedd are self-employed, compared with a Welsh average of 16%. What provisions have the four Governments made to assure self-employed people that they will be compensated for lost income arising from the covid-19 outbreak?

Matt Hancock: I am working with both the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the Welsh Government, who have played their part with great care and responsibility in rising to this challenge.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and commend him for his handling of this outbreak. The public health advice has been absolutely clear during the contain phase. As we move into the delay and mitigate phases, will he make sure the advice on social distancing and longer isolation periods, particularly for vulnerable groups, is as fast and has the same clarity?

Matt Hancock: Yes. We are upgrading the communications activities tomorrow but, should we move into the mitigate phase, the communications will clearly need to be different and will need to be upgraded yet again.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): We have known for years that people on outsourced contracts do not have access to sick pay. The coronavirus is now throwing up that problem for the wider community, yet we heard the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy talk about people going on to universal credit—he does not live in the real world if he thinks that is possible within three days—and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care talks today about seven days' isolation and, when pressed, about ringing the GP. Can he give very clear advice to those who have to choose between working and eating, so that we make sure they do not go to work when they are ill?

Matt Hancock: I have been absolutely clear about the legal position, and I have said that we are keeping the area under review.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): As cases escalate, and we have to assume they probably will, even a well-prepared NHS will become stretched, with health professionals likely to be affected. Self-help will become important, and we are already seeing a national shortage of hand-sanitising gel. Will my right hon. Friend work with the manufacturers to ensure basic products such as paracetamol, ibuprofen and cough medicines remain widely available on the high street?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is completely right and, in fact, our no-deal planning and our no-deal stockpiles are playing an important part in making sure we are fully prepared and ready.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): On when to move to the delay phase, the Secretary of State said that he was “mindful of scientific advice that reacting too early...carries its own risks”.

Could he set out for the House what those risks are?

Matt Hancock: I would highlight two. The first is that there is an economic and social impact of disruption; if an action has no medical benefit, there is no need for that disruption. The second is a medical risk. Behavioural science and experience from previous similar outbreaks shows that, if we ask people too early to do things that are disruptive to their normal life, they may try to return to normal earlier than they otherwise would. At the moment, the number of cases is relatively small. If we go into the reasonable worst-case scenario, it will rise sharply and be high for a number of weeks. We need to keep people doing the right, responsible thing over a

period of weeks and, if we ask them to move too soon, they may question whether that advice was the right advice.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Experience here suggests that these outbreaks are about cool heads and timing, and I suggest that the Secretary of State, his chief medical officer and his Public Health Minister have been exemplary in both those things. Does he agree that the media have a responsibility in this regard? You do not release everything in the locker at once. That is not about the Government being slow to this; it is about the Government having a plan. What they have set out today is a clear, strategic and staged plan to do what is needed, when it is needed, in the national interest.

Matt Hancock: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for what he says. We are trying to take exactly the approach that he sets out. It builds on my answer to the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) on getting the timing right as well as the decisions on the correct actions to take. We need to get both right. We will be guided by the science in supporting the public through what will be a difficult time.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Health Secretary will know that many people are caring for elderly relatives, sometimes just popping in every day to make sure they are fed or to get them up in the morning. If those people end up having to self-isolate or getting ill, what support will there be for them—they may not be getting any sick pay—and for the elderly relatives who depend on some urgent support and may not have any other relatives nearby to provide it?

Matt Hancock: We are very concerned about this issue. We will address precisely the issue that the right hon. Member raises in the communication that I indicated we will publish soon to social care providers. This is an important and difficult consideration for what we do in a reasonable worst-case scenario. Of course, all the time, we are working to avoid that scenario. One area that has been highlighted in public is making it much easier to onboard volunteers, but they are not the only part of the answer to this problem.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): GAMA Healthcare in my constituency is playing a vital role in China as part of a bundled approach to infection control of covid-19. Adrian Fellows, a scientist from GAMA, says that washing hands is vital, but his concern is that every handwash is being promoted as an effective intervention, even those that are cosmetic-based, and supermarket sanitisers without a log 4 reduction are running the risk of giving a false sense of security. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that Government advice on hand washing is thorough, so that people do not run that risk of having a false sense of security?

Matt Hancock: I will look into our guidance on the nature of hand sanitisers and make sure that it takes into account the very best scientific advice. There is a broader point here, which is that although sanitising one's hands with hand sanitiser is good, it is not nearly as good as washing one's hands for 20 seconds with soap and, preferably, in hot water. That is the best thing to deal with the virus.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the chief medical officer for ringing me when we had cases earlier in the month in the city; it was very helpful advice. The advice that the Secretary of State has just given is that we need to wash our hands. So will the Government make moves to ensure that, when people enter any building in this country, there is a place for them to wash their hands? I am not just talking about advice; can we introduce health and safety guidelines to put a requirement on every employer, every restaurant and so on? If we are going to take this seriously, we need to up our game. Will the Government commit to that now?

Matt Hancock: I will look into the extent to which that can be done. Many public buildings do have sinks available. At the core of our response to the problem, which the hon. Gentleman reasonably raises, is getting the communications right, so that people can use existing sinks and soap to do what I know he wishes them to do.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State and his team for keeping me informed yesterday of the two local confirmed cases of covid-19, but a number of schools decided to close their doors as a precaution. What message does he have for those schools and others across the communities on how to deal with this issue?

Matt Hancock: I commend my hon. Friend for the responsible and calm way in which he has responded to the news in his constituency. The message to schools is clear: if they do not have both a positive case and the advice from Public Health England to close, they should not close. The Minister for School Standards, who is sitting next to me, reiterates that message. We have a hotline that schools can call to get that advice from Public Health England, and schools that close without the advice from PHE are contacted by the regional schools commissioner, who explains to them the position.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): There are now four confirmed cases of covid-19 in Hertfordshire, yet Hertfordshire has an unfunded burden in next year's financial budget of £2.8 million from the cost of the pay uplift for nurses and health visitors under the "Agenda for Change" programme. I am told that potentially up to 30 directors of public health across this country are poised to have to cancel contracts and make school nurses and health visitors redundant if this money is not confirmed. With less than a month until the next financial year, can the Government confirm today, or within the next 24 hours, that the money for the "Agenda for Change" pay uplifts will be made available?

Matt Hancock: We have increased the public health grant and we have increased local authority spending power by 4.4% in real terms next year, which of course comes in at the start of April.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): My constituency includes a number of semi-rural, coastal and isolated communities, where information on as local a basis as possible will be needed, not just the national picture. Can my right hon. Friend provide me with the relevant departmental and Public Health England contacts so that I can obtain this information in real time?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I would be happy to do that.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State confirm that claimants will not face benefit sanctions if they miss appointments because they are choosing to self-isolate?

Matt Hancock: Yes, that is absolutely our intention.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend thank the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Harlow for dealing with a case and for all the work it does? May I bring him back to the issue of workers? In Harlow, at least 8,000 people are working in retail, food, customer service, front of house, leisure, transport and accommodation services. Those people, who are often on lower pay, could lose their wages, especially if restaurants cut the number of staff, for one reason or another, in the event of a serious outbreak. Will the Government consider setting up an insurance scheme if things get much worse to ensure that individuals such as the workers I have mentioned do not lose their incomes?

Matt Hancock: As I have said several times, we are keeping this area under review. We are also looking into what we can do to support successful businesses that might have a short-term negative impact from some of the disruptions that have come with, and could come further with, coronavirus.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Sick pay and statutory sick pay can be complex, but there is one simple truth within that system: the poorer someone is, the poorer their protections are. Those very worst-off at work want clarity from us that doing the right thing and following the Secretary of State's guidance will not put them at a detriment. Nothing in the public conversation and, frankly, nothing we have heard today gives me confidence to say that to people in my community, so will he take this opportunity to say, from the Dispatch Box, that not one single person in this country who is following his advice will suffer a detriment to their terms and conditions?

Matt Hancock: I have already made it clear that we have a robust statutory sick pay system in this country, that self-isolation counts as illness within that system and that we are keeping the system under review. So people can have confidence that, if they are asked to self-isolate, that is exactly what they should do.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): Sadly, it is healthcare professionals who are likely to be most exposed to the virus. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to make sure that we have sufficient numbers of healthcare professionals at work to deal with this crisis?

Matt Hancock: That is an incredibly important issue, not least because of the impact of the virus directly on healthcare workers in other jurisdictions—we have seen the impact here, too. We have a broad programme, led by the NHS, to make sure that we protect healthcare workers—not only clinicians but the non-clinicians mentioned by the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper)—and have as much support in the NHS as possible, including from, for instance, recently retired people and from volunteers, as mentioned earlier. If the virus becomes widespread, it will be all hands to the

pump in the NHS, as with social care. We have extensive planning under way to make sure that the NHS can respond.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I have been contacted by a constituent who is a consultant in emergency medicine at the Countess of Chester Hospital, which the Secretary of State knows well. My constituent has expressed concern about the use of nebulisers for the delivery of medicines for respiratory illnesses, on the basis that there is evidence that they might enhance the spread of airborne viruses in a confined space. I have been in touch with Public Health England about the issue, and there is some debate about whether it agrees with my constituent, but he has provided evidence from the 2003 SARS outbreak that demonstrates that his fears may be upheld. It is a technical point, but will the Secretary look into it and get his officials to check it out?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. I would not dare to pronounce on the science and medicine behind that, but I can ensure that the experts, including the deputy chief medical officer, who is an expert in these things and is in the Box, will respond.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State for the constructive way in which he has worked with the other Health Ministers in the devolved Administrations to get this plan ready for today, but may I remind him of the importance of continuing this approach as the situation unfolds in the days and weeks ahead, to ensure that there is a genuine, joined-up, UK-wide strategy to combat coronavirus?

Matt Hancock: Yes—I would say that this is an example of the devolved Governments and the UK Government working well together. The best example of that is the four chief medical officers. As my right hon. Friend well knows from his time as a Secretary of State, each devolved nation has its own CMO, and the forum of the four of them provides an extremely useful place to debate and then to agree, so that we can have a UK-wide answer even though some areas, such as NHS delivery, are devolved.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): In times of crisis, fear can foster discrimination. There is serious concern about reports of racism being linked to the coronavirus outbreak, with people being singled out and abused simply because of east Asian appearance, and some children being bullied. Does the Secretary of State agree that inaccurate terms such as “Wuhan coronavirus” should be avoided because they sadly reinforce racist views? Will he take steps to ensure that Government communications always use medically accurate terms? Will he ensure that the Cabinet acts to ensure that everything possible is done to stop the denigration and blaming of people in relation to this outbreak?

Matt Hancock: Yes—I agree with all those points.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. Following on from the question by my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) about working with the devolved Administrations, will

my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State confirm that although the delivery is devolved, this is a whole-UK plan? There should be no confusion in any of the devolved areas of the United Kingdom: this is a UK-wide plan and the information published today is applicable to and the same for every part of the United Kingdom.

Matt Hancock: That is right; in fact, the document is badged with the emblems of the four nations. There are of course elements of it that are technically different in terms of delivery, but they are set out in the plan.

If I may take a step back, the deputy chief medical officer has already got a note to me to answer the question from the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson). The expert committee NERVTAG—the new and emerging respiratory virus threats advisory group—has looked at the issue of nebulisers and does not consider their use an infection-prone procedure.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Unless something has changed overnight, the 111 service is not available in most of Wales. Most people in Wales would be far better advised to ring 0845 46 47, which is the NHS Direct Wales telephone number. My bigger anxiety is that so far, despite all the good things he has done, the Secretary of State has still not been able to answer the central question of people on zero-hours contracts. They include a large number of my constituents, who would want to do the right thing but, according to what he has said so far, would be financially out of pocket because there is no means of recompensing them. Surely we must put that right; otherwise, we have a massive hole in the plan.

Matt Hancock: As I have said many times, we have a robust SSP system and we keep it under review. On the hon. Gentleman's point about 111, we have changed the system so that if someone dials 111 from Wales, they are automatically redirected to the NHS Direct number in Wales.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's clarification that schools should not close unless they absolutely have to—not least because if parents are having to look after their children, there may be fewer nurses and doctors who can get to hospitals. My right hon. Friend knows that the average age of hospital volunteers—including my fellow workers at the Gloucestershire Royal Hospital—is in the range that could be at risk of this virus, and they are often receptionists, so will he consider asking the NHS to give guidance to hospitals on whether such people should be on the frontline, with people still coming to hospitals thinking that the best thing to do is to be checked?

Matt Hancock: In the first instance, the best thing to do if you think you have coronavirus is not to go to a hospital or GP surgery but to ring 111, wherever you are in the UK. My hon. Friend is quite right on the other point he made.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am strongly in favour of getting the habitually clarty to wash their hands, so I am glad that the Secretary of State is reinforcing that message. May I ask him specifically about the advice to Department for Work and Pensions decision makers? What advice has been circulated within

the DWP, and can all elected Members get a copy of it, just in case any of our constituents find that that advice is not being followed through?

Matt Hancock: I will take that issue up with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I am sure he would agree that as the virus possibly spreads, members of the public will be worried about what they should and should not be doing, so will he confirm how he will specifically communicate with members of the public to prevent panic, particularly if we have to restrict public meetings and the use of public transport?

Matt Hancock: That is a very good question and it is important that we get that right. One reason why we have set out this plan, which includes measures that we hope not to take and may not take but are prepared to take if necessary, is that, should those measures be taken, it will not be a surprise to people—they are clearly part of a plan. I do understand—of course I do—that people are worried about this, and I also understand that some of the things we are proposing, and some that other countries are doing, are not the sort of things that a Government in a free country normally does. That is why we have taken this approach. It is quite unusual in government to set out a plan of things that we might do; we normally set out what we are going to do. The reason we have done so is precisely in response to the concern that my hon. Friend wisely raises. We want to do everything we can to reassure people, while not over-reassuring and instead being totally transparent about our frank assessment, based on the science, of the situation that the country is in and what we can best do to get ourselves best through this and fight this disease.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): For the trusts that host regional infectious diseases units, will the Secretary of State say what additional emergency money is going into them now and whether there are plans to extend those units to increase bed capacity?

Matt Hancock: We do have plans to be able to ramp up the bed capacity that can be used to deal with coronavirus patients, and, as I said earlier, we have already extended funding to trusts and are willing to consider that further if necessary.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): People are understandably concerned, and I have been contacted by some of my constituents about potential treatments, including vitamin therapy, that are appearing on the internet. Will my right hon. Friend send a clear message from the Chamber that it is the NHS and the Government who will provide the authoritative advice on medical treatments? Will he work with social media companies to remove any misleading content?

Matt Hancock: Yes, and that is a very important point. Fake news in response to a virus like this can be dangerous and damaging to health and it should be taken down. I am working with the social media companies—I spoke to the main social media companies

[*Matt Hancock*]

yesterday—and the biggest of them are playing a very responsible role. If someone searches on Google, the top two sites that come up for coronavirus are from the World Health Organisation, and the NHS is third. Google is promoting good, high-quality, medically informed advice, and the other social media platforms—the major ones with which we are working—are also taking this very seriously.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State agree that the key drivers of aggregate transmission are, first, the level of movement and, secondly, the level of assembly? Will he therefore take this opportunity to advise elderly people in particular, who are more at risk, that they would be well advised to restrict their movements—perhaps go to the shops once a week instead of twice—and to work as and when they can in a sustainable way from home rather than at work? Does he also agree that we should, if at all possible, avoid big assemblies of people as transmission rates are higher there? If not, we will end up having to enforce roadblocks and confinement much more quickly than otherwise.

Matt Hancock: No, we will be advised by the science. The point that has been raised many times is that timing is really important. There are downsides in terms of the destruction and medical downsides in terms of controlling the spread of this virus if things are done too soon. I am very happy to arrange a briefing for the hon. Gentleman—a briefing is available with the chief medical officer at 4.15 pm today for anybody who wants a private briefing—and to take him through some of that science.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his diligence. There are some 11.8 million elderly people, which is 18% of the population, and some 4 million diabetics, which is 6% of the population. I declare an interest as one of those. Those who have had the flu jab to protect them from the flu may feel that they are okay. Will the Minister give guidance to this section of people—those with chronic diseases and the elderly who have had the flu jab?

Matt Hancock: Yes, we are paying particular attention to vulnerable people—the elderly and those with other health conditions that may make them either more susceptible or more at risk should they get this virus—and there will be additional advice in due course, guided by science, as all of us should be in tackling this disease.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): The Secretary of State has been asked about this several times, and I am slightly worried that he just does not get it. Some working people do not get sick pay. We really need to know what his plans are for them.

Matt Hancock: As I have said, I have provided answers to that question a number of times, including that we are keeping this under review and that the sick pay system is robust. I look forward to answering more questions in the same way. I cannot give a different answer to the one I have given to the same question when it has been repeatedly asked.

Points of Order

2.2 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is further to what we have just been talking about. Would it not be a good idea if the parliamentary estate were providing leadership to the country on this issue? We have lots of toilets in this building that do not work properly, in which there is no soap, and in which it is difficult to wash our hands properly. Would it not be a good idea if we led by example? Thousands of members of the public come in here every week and tourists come from all over the world to see this place. Could you use your good offices, Madam Deputy Speaker, not to wander around all the toilets yourself personally, but to make sure that staff understand that this is a very serious and important issue that we need to get right?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. Silver Command meetings are held every day to discuss the situation in Parliament. The House of Commons Commission will be discussing the matter at its next meeting, and Mr Speaker has held meetings with the chief medical officer. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the House authorities take this very seriously, as do the Speaker and the Commission. Any further information will be passed on as soon as it is forthcoming.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Would you like to extend that point to include introducing hand sanitisers in various places across the estate, as well as cleaning the toilets, so that people are in a position to cleanse their hands wherever they are in any part of the estate?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. There are hand sanitisers in various places around the estate but, again, that is something that is kept under review on a daily basis.

BILLS PRESENTED

DOMESTIC ABUSE BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Priti Patel, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Robert Buckland, Secretary Elizabeth Truss, Secretary Robert Jenrick, the Attorney General, Victoria Atkins and Alex Chalk, presented a Bill to make provision in relation to domestic abuse; to make provision for and in connection with the establishment of a Domestic Abuse Commissioner; to prohibit cross-examination in person in family proceedings in certain circumstances; to make provision about certain violent or sexual offences, and offences involving other abusive behaviour, committed outside the United Kingdom; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 96), with explanatory notes (Bill 96-EN).

SENTENCING (WOMEN) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Daisy Cooper, supported by Sarah Olney, Christine Jardine, Layla Moran, Munira Wilson, Wendy Chamberlain, Wera Hobhouse, Rosie Duffield and Liz Saville Roberts, presented a Bill to require courts to impose community sentences on women offenders unless they have committed a serious or violent offence and pose a threat to the public; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 10 July, and to be printed (Bill 97).

SCHOOL TOILETS (ACCESS DURING LESSONS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Layla Moran, supported by Sarah Olney, Munira Wilson, Wendy Chamberlain, Jamie Stone, Daisy Cooper, Christine Jardine, Wera Hobhouse, Caroline Lucas, and Alison Thewliss, presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish guidance for state-funded schools on allowing pupil access to toilets during lessons; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 March, and to be printed (Bill 98).

HIGH SPEED RAIL (WEST MIDLANDS - CREWE) Bill

Presentation and all stages (Standing Order No. 57 and Order, 2 March)

Andrew Stephenson, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary George Eustice, Secretary Grant Shapps, presented a Bill to make provision for a railway between a junction with Phase One of High Speed 2, near Fradley Wood in Staffordshire, and a junction with the west coast main line near Crewe in Cheshire; and for connected purposes.

Deemed to have been read the First, Second and Third time, and passed (Order, 2 March).

Rule of Law (Enforcement by Public Authorities)*Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)*

2.5 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require public authorities to exercise their statutory powers to investigate and take enforcement action for breaches of the law; to make provision for sanctions for failing to take such action; and for connected purposes.

Adherence to the rule of law is one of the fundamental elements of the British constitution. The World Justice Project produces an annual report on the performance of countries across the world in complying with the rule of law. In the most recent report, the United Kingdom scores 80% and is 12th in the international league table. The top country scored 90%. In its working definition of the rule of law, the WJP requires that regulations are fairly and effectively implemented and enforced. This is an aspect on which the United Kingdom can do a lot better.

Recent events in Cambridge, where the police did nothing to prevent or to take action against blatant examples of criminal damage, serve as a salutary reminder why the Bill is needed. Cambridge is but one of an increasing number of instances in which the Government, their agencies, the police and local authorities have failed or refused to take action to enforce the law. Now that we have left the European Union and are soon to be freed from the yoke of the European Court of Justice, it is a good time to take stock.

Continental justice, while paying lip-service to the rule of law, has often incorporated a significant discretionary element, which renders it vulnerable to political pressure for interference and ultimately to corruption by making some more equal than others under the law. The Bill reasserts the importance in our legal system of equality of protection under the law and of equal access to the enforcement authorities charged with investigating breaches of the law and enforcing sanctions against wrongdoers.

I can best illustrate the problem by example. Earlier this year, Mr Justice Julian Knowles, in the case of Henry Miller and the Humberside Police, ruled that despite a “hate incident” not being a crime, it was reasonable that such an incident could be logged pursuant to operational guidance adopted by the College of Policing in 2014. *The Daily Telegraph* has established that some 120,000 non-crime incidents have been logged in this way in the past five years, yet neither this Parliament nor the Government have given any authority to the police to deploy scarce and valuable resources on giving priority to non-crime incidents over criminal activity. In answer to a parliamentary question, the Policing Minister told me:

“The College of Policing is independent from Government and its role is clear: setting high professional standards...acting as the national voice of policing; and ensuring police training and ethics is of the highest possible quality.”

But giving perverse priority to non-crime incidents is not among its roles.

While the Home Office collects and publishes information on hate crime offences, information is not collected on non-crime hate incidents or the investigative resource allocated to them. This makes it impossible for Members to hold the police to account for their misuse of resources.

[Sir Christopher Chope]

It is outrageous that the police are giving priority to matters that are not criminal while criminal activity, which is rife in our country, goes uninvestigated and unpunished. A prime example of this is criminal fraud. Fewer than 1% of police officers directly investigate fraud, while scarce police resources are being expended in recording non-crimes. In the year ending March 2019, 741,123 crimes of fraud were reported, giving rise to £2.2 billion in losses to victims, but only 42,127 crimes were disseminated for investigation and enforcement by local authorities. Judicial action is being taken in only about 1% of cases. This data is from Action Fraud; if ever there was a misnomer, it is the name “Action Fraud”. I have a constituent who was defrauded of £20,000 last year, from a Santander account, and we are still waiting for Action Fraud to take any action. Despite the Crown Prosecution Service reporting that fraud is the most commonly experienced crime in England and Wales, with an estimated 3.4 million incidents in the year ending March 2017, fewer than 1% of police officers are actually investigating it.

The purported justification for recording non-crime hate incidents is that they can be the precursor to criminal activity, but an equally strong—or stronger—argument applies to cases of civil or non-criminal fraud. Why do Home Office rules only allow the recording of fraud offences that meet the definition of crime, and why does a similar rule not apply in the case of hate crime? The Bill would reconfirm that the main responsibility of law enforcement authorities under the rule of law should be to investigate and bring sanctions against those in breach of the existing law. Deployment of resources in respect of non-criminal incidents, whether involving hate or fraud, should be treated as non-core activities.

Another area of criminal impunity relates to illegal immigrants. Best estimates are that there are more than 1 million illegal immigrants in the United Kingdom, many of whom are engaged in illegal working and other clandestine criminal activities. They use our public services while undermining fair competition in the workplace. Section 24 of the Immigration Act 1971 sets out a series of criminal offences, including knowingly entering the United Kingdom without leave and remaining beyond the time limited by leave. Despite the vast number of continuing offences against section 24, few prosecutions, if any, are commenced. This scandal is completely at odds with the priorities of the general public and our constituents. The number of deportations is also pitifully few.

The scope of this Bill, however, goes far beyond fraud and illegal immigration. Other activities that are the subject of regulations that are inconsistently enforced include the licensing of houses in multiple occupation. The Government have set down minimum standards

enforceable under the licensing system, yet it is estimated that more than half the properties that should be licensed are unlicensed. While the owners of these 76,000 properties operate with impunity, some local authorities are seeking to penalise those who are registered by imposing size standards far higher than the Government minimum. Local authorities are ignoring all properties that should be incorporated into the licensing system while trying to penalise those that have already applied for licensing.

A related scandal is that of rogue landlords. Although there are more than 2 million landlords in England, only 18 individuals and five companies have been put on the register of rogue landlords for offences committed since 6 April 2018. This ineffectual regulation is driving good private landlords out of the market without deterring or penalising the rogues.

Many colleagues will be aware of constituents’ anger due to double standards relating to illegal activities by Gypsies and Travellers compared with the actions of law-abiding residents, as well as due to local authorities’ failure to enforce trading standards laws against the rogue operators of park home sites. In the last month alone, I have received complaints from constituents about the police’s failure to pursue a blatant case of threatened unlawful eviction, their refusal to act against the dealers of illegal drugs and their failure to enforce the Highways Act 1980 against a pavement obstruction. In the latter example, that was despite the offence having taken place just around the corner from the police station in Christchurch.

Respect for our legal system depends upon public trust that effective enforcement action will be taken consistently. The Bill would help to restore public respect for the law and for the rule of law.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Sir Christopher Chope, Sir Edward Leigh, Sir Desmond Swayne, Mr Philip Hollobone, Nigel Mills, Mr Peter Bone, Bob Blackman and Paul Howell present the Bill.

Sir Christopher Chope accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 September, and to be printed (Bill 99).

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (ANTICIPATION AND ADJUSTMENTS) BILL

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

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

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

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Deputy Speaker's Statement

2.16 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I have a short announcement to make about the certification of Bills under the so-called English votes for English laws Standing Orders. Since those Standing Orders were passed, it has been the practice of the Speaker or a Deputy Speaker to suspend the sitting for certification prior to Third Reading in any case when a Bill had been amended since Second Reading. Now that the House has greater experience of this process, Mr Speaker proposes that such a suspension should take place only when a non-Government amendment has been made on the day on which consent is required. In all other cases, the Speaker or Deputy Speaker will sign a certificate in the Chamber in the form of the provisional certificate issued alongside the selection list, and thus already available to the House.

Prisoners (Disclosure of Information About Victims) Bill

Considered in Committee

[DAME ROSIE WINTERTON *in the Chair*]

Clause 1

MURDER OR MANSLAUGHTER: PRISONER'S NON-DISCLOSURE OF INFORMATION

2.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Chris Philp): I beg to move amendment 1, page 2, line 26, at end insert—

“28B Indecent images: prisoner's non-disclosure of information

(1) The Parole Board must comply with this section when making a public protection decision about a life prisoner if—

- (a) the prisoner's life sentence was passed for—
 - (i) an offence of taking an indecent photograph of a child, or
 - (ii) a relevant offence of making an indecent pseudo-photograph of a child;
- (b) the Parole Board does not know the identity of the child who is the subject of the relevant indecent image; and
- (c) the Parole Board believes that the prisoner has information about the identity of the child who is the subject of the relevant indecent image which the prisoner has not disclosed to the Parole Board (“the prisoner's non-disclosure”).

(2) When making the public protection decision about the prisoner, the Parole Board must take into account—

- (a) the prisoner's non-disclosure; and
- (b) the reasons, in the Parole Board's view, for the prisoner's non-disclosure.

(3) This section does not limit the matters which the Parole Board must or may take into account when making a public protection decision.

(4) In subsection (1)(a), the reference to a life sentence includes a life sentence passed before the coming into force of section 1 of the Prisoners (Disclosure of Information About Victims) Act 2020.

(5) For the purposes of this section, an offence is an “offence of taking an indecent photograph of a child” if it is—

- (a) an offence of taking an indecent photograph of a child under section 1(1)(a) of the Protection of Children Act 1978 (the “England and Wales offence”), or
- (b) an offence of taking an indecent photograph of a child under the law of Scotland, Northern Ireland, any of the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man or any other country or territory that corresponds to the England and Wales offence.

(6) For the purposes of this section, an offence is a “relevant offence of making an indecent pseudo-photograph of a child” if—

- (a) it is—
 - (i) an offence under section 1(1)(a) of the Protection of Children Act 1978 of making an indecent pseudo-photograph of a child (the “England and Wales offence”), or
 - (ii) an offence of making an indecent pseudo-photograph of a child under the law of Scotland, Northern Ireland, any of the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man or any other country or territory that corresponds to the England and Wales offence, and
- (b) the Parole Board believes that an image of a real child was or may have been used in the making of the pseudo-photograph;

and in the application of this section to a relevant offence of making an indecent pseudo-photograph of a child, the references in subsection (1)(b) and (c) to the child who is the subject of the relevant indecent image are references to the real child.

(7) In this section,—

“public protection decision”, in relation to a prisoner, means the decision, made under section 28(6)(b) for the purposes of section 28(5), as to whether the Parole Board is satisfied that it is no longer necessary for the protection of the public that the prisoner should be confined;

“relevant indecent image” means—

- (a) the photograph to which an offence of taking an indecent photograph of a child relates, or
- (b) the pseudo-photograph to which a relevant offence of making an indecent pseudo-photograph of a child relates.”.

This amends the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997 to require the Parole Board to take account of non-disclosures by life prisoners serving sentences for offences relating to indecent photographs or pseudo-photographs of children.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Government amendment 2.

Clauses 1 to 3 stand part.

Chris Philp: This Bill, which passed its Second Reading a short time ago, seeks to respond to two incredibly tragic cases—the tragic murder of Helen McCourt, which happened 32 years ago, and the terrible abuse committed by nursery teacher Vanessa George, who abused the trust placed in her by the parents of tiny children.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Unfortunately, I have to attend a Delegated Legislation Committee, so I will not be able to take part in these proceedings. However, I thank the Minister and his team for introducing this Bill and I remind the House that it goes beyond the two names that he mentioned. My constituent Linda Jones lost her daughter, Danielle Jones, and the whereabouts of the body have never been revealed. While this Bill will help only a small cohort of people, it does go beyond the two names that the Minister mentioned. I welcome the action that the Government are taking and thank them for what they have done.

Chris Philp: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I am very aware that the murderer of his constituent’s daughter, Stuart Campbell, is still in prison. It is to precisely that kind of person that the provisions of the Bill apply, because we want to make sure that when—

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Can I add another name to the list? My constituent Michael O’Leary has been missing since January, suspected to have been murdered, and the individual charged with his murder is refusing to let the police know where the body has been hidden. For the families who are now living through this trauma, the fact that they cannot retrieve the body is hugely traumatic. They wanted me to put on the record today their support for what the Government intend to do.

Chris Philp: I am very grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. He powerfully expresses the importance for the families of victims of knowing where the body of their loved one is. When prisoners, including Stuart Campbell, refuse to disclose the whereabouts of a body, it simply adds to the anguish that the families suffer. In the case that the hon. Gentleman mentions, the individual has been charged but not yet convicted. If that individual is convicted and imprisoned, and the Parole Board comes to consider his release in the future, it will be bound by the provisions of this Bill to take into account the non-disclosure when deciding whether or not to release them.

Having met Marie McCourt, who is Helen McCourt’s mother, the Lord Chancellor and I have heard at first hand just how distressing it is when a prisoner refuses to disclose the whereabouts of the victim’s body. I would like once again to pay particular tribute to Marie McCourt for the campaigning that she has bravely undertaken over these past 32 years since the murder of her daughter Helen.

Related to this is the question of the non-disclosure of the identity of child victims of indecent imagery. I notice that the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) is in his place. He has been speaking out for his constituents whose children were victims of Vanessa George, the nursery school teacher who so cruelly abused the very young, very tiny children in her care, and then refused to disclose the identity of her young victims, thereby adding to the distress of the parents, the families and the victims themselves. I again pay tribute to him for the campaigning that he has undertaken on this topic.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): How often are the circumstances set out in amendment 1 under new subsection (1)(a)(i) and (ii) actually likely to occur? A life sentence for photographic offences—is that actually likely to happen often?

Chris Philp: I am delighted that my right hon. Friend has turned to the particulars of the Bill, because I would now like to address them.

There are two substantive clauses in this Bill. Clause 1 relates to life sentences handed down for murder, manslaughter or indecent images. It is worth mentioning, in response to my right hon. Friend’s intervention, that amendment 1 adds into the provisions of this Bill sentences of imprisonment for public protection, which can also be handed down for making indecent images. Clause 2 covers the slightly broader type of sentence—namely, extended determinate sentences, whether they are handed down for manslaughter or the failure to disclose the subject of an indecent image. He is quite right to point out that in cases where there has been a failure to disclose the victim of an indecent image, it is more likely that there will be an extended determinate sentence than a life sentence. Indeed, in the case of Vanessa George, the sentence handed down was an extended determinate sentence, so that would have been caught by clause 2 rather than by clause 1.¹

The two clauses taken together cover the range of sentences that might be handed down—life sentences and imprisonment for public protection under amendment 1,

1. [Official Report, 4 May 2020, Vol. 675, c. 6MC.]

and extended determinate sentences under clause 2. The substance of these two clauses ensures that when the Parole Board considers release and comes to make its decision about dangerousness and public protection, the requirement to take into account non-disclosure, and the reasons, in its view, for that non-disclosure is put on a statutory—a legal—footing. That is enshrined in new section 28A(1)(a) and (b) in clause 1(1). This means that at no point in the future can the Parole Board ever decide to vary its guidelines to disregard these matters. It will also very much focus the mind of the Parole Board, and send a message to it, that this House—this Parliament—takes non-disclosure very, very seriously and expects that to be fully reflected in release decisions.

I notice that the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) is now in his place. I would like to repeat the tribute I paid earlier to his and his constituent Marie McCourt's campaigning on this topic over very many years. It is a testament to his perseverance through what has been a turbulent period in British politics that this Bill is now here in Committee. Without his work, this would certainly not have happened.

Amendment 2 to clause 1 is a technical, consequential amendment—a subsequent provision just to make sure that amendment 1 works technically.

I hope that I have explained the operative provisions of this Bill, which will place on a statutory footing the obligation on the Parole Board to consider non-disclosure of victims' whereabouts or non-disclosure of the identity of a child victim of indecent images. I think the whole House, and indeed all our constituents, will very strongly welcome that. I commend the amendments and the clauses to the Committee.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I rise in support of the amendments that the Minister has just set out to this very important Bill.

The crimes that Vanessa George committed against the babies and toddlers in the constituency I represent at Little Ted's nursery were simply disgusting. They will be abhorred by any right-minded person. It does not need a partisan label—a party political badge—to know that this is a good piece of natural justice: a law that should be supported by everyone of all parties.

I set out the particular case around Vanessa George on Second Reading, but on behalf of the families—those who were able to come forward—I want to thank the Minister and his ministerial colleagues for the way they have brought forward this campaign. It would be very easy for a Government to ignore a campaign by an Opposition MP, and I am grateful to Ministers for not doing that but instead looking at the victims and the severity of the crimes involved and acting accordingly by doing what is right.

Vanessa George still shows no remorse for the crimes that she committed and no remorse for the fact that she still refuses to name the children she abused. We do not know how many children at Little Ted's nursery she did abuse, because she has not told anyone. We know how many children were there, and we have a good idea about which children might have been exposed to her cruel and evil crimes. Those children are now fast-emerging young people who are coming to terms with their place in the world and the way that they feel. The crimes that were committed against them by Vanessa George as

children will have long-lasting psychological, and in some cases physical, consequences for them in future. A child not knowing whether they were a victim themselves not only deprives the families of the peace of mind of knowing but deprives that child of the help and support they might otherwise have been able to access. Uncertainty is a prison that those children and their families will be in for quite some time.

The right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) raised an issue in relation to life sentences. The families do not mind what the sentence is. Anyone who declines to name the children they abuse should not be eligible for early release. In particular, on the question whether a life sentence is passed down for an offence of taking an indecent image of a child or a relevant offence of making an indecent pseudo image of a child, I would be grateful if the Minister could set out whether that also applies to contemporaneous charges. In many cases, it is very unlikely that a life sentence would be passed down just for taking those images, but it might be passed down for the indecent images and the acts of abuse themselves, so would that collection of charges fall under the description in amendment 1 under new subsection 28B (1)(a)(i) and (ii)?

2.30 pm

It is really important that, on behalf of the families, I try to get as robust a Bill as possible. Their experience of not knowing, of going to the nursery and of being told, in the first instance, that their child—a baby or a toddler—may have been abused and that the images may have been shared with a network of paedophiles, as well as the crushing uncertainty about whether those images might still be on a paedophile's hard drive somewhere or in some rotten corner of the dark web, is a demon that sits with these families for quite some time, so anything we can do to make the Bill as robust as we can would be welcome.

Vanessa George received a novel sentence at the time for her crimes. That indeterminate sentence complicated the case, and the Parole Board addressed that when it tried to make its judgment. This legislation will go a long way towards preventing the early release of someone such as Vanessa George in the future. It also sends a clear message to those who abuse children that if they refuse to name the children, they will not be released early. In fact, that additional reticence—that hesitation or refusal to come forward with information—will be regarded negatively by the Parole Board.

On behalf of all the families, I want to put on record their thanks for the swift action Ministers have taken. Parliament and politics often get a bad name, but Ministers have responded swiftly and in such a decent way to a campaign that was so important to families in Plymouth. I thank them, and I encourage Members to ensure that the Bill moves swiftly through the rest of its stages in Parliament.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): Progress should always be welcomed, and the Bill is progress. It sends a clear message to Parole Board members about the Government's priorities. Our priority should be to have a laser-like focus on the victims of crime and their families.

Of all the things that can happen to us, having a close friend or family member murdered or fall victim to a paedophile is one of the greatest possible injustices.

[*Dr Kieran Mullan*]

Through the police, the courts and the wider justice system, ordinary people should be able to secure redress for injustice. That is why we have these systems and why they have been introduced and built on over time. Otherwise, ordinary people would have no alternative but to take matters into their own hands.

Today, we are trying to deliver improved redress in at least one regard. We are aiming to prevent the truly horrendous injustice of a victim's family having to watch as the person who killed their loved one walks away from prison having not revealed the location of their relative's body. We are also aiming to prevent paedophiles from leaving their victims unidentified, with all the uncertainty and distress that that might cause families whose children were within the reach of these people.

To ensure that we truly honour the memory of Helen and others, it is vital that we ensure that the changes and the progress we are making in the House today make a difference in the real world for victims of crime and their families. That is how we ensure that campaigners such as Marie are truly able to think about their lost relatives and to take at least some comfort from the fact that their deaths have led to something positive.

Will any guidance be issued to the Parole Board on how the new statutory duty is expected to be given consideration and what weight it is likely to carry? Will the Minister outline the expected impact this change in law will have? How confident can we be that people who, prior to this law, would have been released will now not be?

I would ask that we keep an open mind on this issue. Today's legislation is welcome and positive, but we need to make sure that, in reality, it secures the redress that victims and their families rightly seek.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): As I stated on Second Reading, the Opposition support the Bill. It rightly addresses the situation of prisoners who have been convicted of murder or manslaughter who then refuse to reveal the identity or the whereabouts of the body, and also the situation of those who have been convicted of taking or making indecent images of children and refuse to identify their victims. Under the Bill, the non-disclosure in both cases is to be formally considered by the Parole Board when someone is being considered for release on licence.

The Bill is the result, first, of Helen's law, which was introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn). My hon. Friend's constituent Helen McCourt was murdered, and her mother has led the campaign for Helen's law. To this day, Helen's murderer refuses to disclose the whereabouts of her body. That compounds the family's grief and denies them the right to lay their loved one to rest.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) has also campaigned for the provisions in the Bill. The shocking case of the nursery assistant Vanessa George shook the community in his constituency. Vanessa George took indecent images of children at the nursery where she worked and was subsequently convicted, but she still refuses to identify the children.

I cannot praise enough the determination and tenacity of Marie McCourt, the mother of Helen McCourt, who fought and lobbied so hard to get this Bill to become law, as it surely now will do, or the community in Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport, which also campaigned hard to get the Bill on the statute book in relation to the images of the children.

The Government have done a good job in drafting the Bill and placing the requirement in it on the Parole Board. The Parole Board rightly owes a duty to victims. Reliving the trauma and horror of a crime when giving a statement can sometimes be distressing and overwhelming for victims, and they should not have to go through that trauma. If the Parole Board was minded to release a prisoner because they were no longer regarded as a threat to the public, the only option open to victims to challenge that view would be to seek a reconsideration of the Parole Board decision. The Bill puts in an additional safeguard in these exceptional cases; we are not talking about a huge number of cases, and the changes will very likely impact only a handful of cases each year, but the suffering caused is immeasurable for the families and loved ones affected.

There cannot be many people who do not agree with the measures in the Bill. It is clear from the speeches on Second Reading and the comments made in this Committee stage that the Bill has cross-party support. To condemn the relatives of victims to further unnecessary anguish is truly appalling and should not go unpunished. This Bill is short—only three clauses—but by amending the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997 and the Criminal Justice Act 2003, it allows for non-disclosure to be formally considered when deciding whether to release a prisoner on licence. That helps to avoid the additional pain and suffering of having to draft a victim statement. The Minister eloquently gave the details of the two amendments the Government have tabled, so I will not repeat or explain them, but both have the support of the Opposition.

As the prevalence of image sharing increases, it will be much easier for the identities of child victims of indecent images to be hidden via various software, and there is a real possibility that there could be more cases of indecent images of unknown child victims. Sentencing guidelines must keep pace with new developments in technology and the regulation of associated offences that we are yet to identify. I therefore await with interest the Government's White Paper on sentencing, which is due later this year.

I hope the Government will tighten up the victims code and think about introducing a victims law. For now, however, the Opposition are content to support the Bill and the two Government amendments and to help Helen's law become an Act of Parliament.

Chris Philp: I thank the shadow Minister for the constructive tone in which he has engaged with the Bill in general and for his remarks a few moments ago. To pick up on his comments on the sentencing White Paper, we do indeed intend to bring it forward later this calendar year. Hopefully, we can look at a much wider range of issues connected with sentencing to make sure that the punishment always fits the crime. In relation to a victims Bill, it is our intention to legislate in that area later in the current Session.

I want to reassure the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on both the points he raised. Where there is a collection of offences, some of which come within the scope of the Bill but others of which do not, this Bill will be engaged when release comes to be considered, even if only one of the offences falls within its scope. His constituents can be reassured that the Bill will apply in those circumstances.

All sentence types are covered. Clause 1, which amends section 28 of the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997, will cover life sentences and, as amended, sentences for imprisonment for public protection. Clause 2, which amends the Criminal Justice Act 2003, covers extended determinate sentences, so all sentence types are covered by this Bill, as amended. I can therefore give the hon. Gentleman the categorical assurance he requested.

In relation to the question raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan), I expect the Parole Board to give significant weight to non-disclosure. The fact that Parliament has gone as far as legislating in this area will send an extremely clear message to the people taking these decisions, and I expect this to weigh heavily on the mind of Parole Board members when they take these decisions. A wider review into the operation of the Parole Board will commence in due course—the so-called root-and-branch review announced in the manifesto last December—and there will be an opportunity for my hon. Friend and all Members to contribute to that discussion.

Putting on the face of the Bill the requirement to take non-disclosure into account means that it can never be changed, other than by a subsequent Act of Parliament. It will also send a message to Parole Board members about how important these issues are for Members of this House, for the reasons described today. I commend the amendments and clauses to the House.

Amendment 1 agreed to.

Amendment made: 2, in clause 1, page 2, line 30, leave out “Section 28A contains” and insert “Sections 28A and 28B contain”.—(Chris Philp.)

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1.

Clause 1, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 2 and 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill, as amended, reported.

Bill, as amended in the Committee, considered.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): There are no amendments on consideration.

As no non-Government amendments have been made to the Bill, I am signing a certificate on the basis of the provisional certificate issued with the selection list. As indicated in that provisional certificate, I certify that the Prisoners (Disclosure of Information About Victims) Bill relates exclusively to England and Wales on matters within devolved legislative competence, under Standing Order No. 83J.

Does the Minister intend to move a consent motion in the Legislative Grand Committee?

Chris Philp *indicated assent.*

The House forthwith resolved itself into the Legislative Grand Committee (England and Wales) (Standing Order No. 83M).

[DAME ROSIE WINTERTON *in the Chair*]

2.43 pm

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): I remind hon. Members that, if there is a Division, only Members representing constituencies in England and Wales may vote.

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That the Legislative Grand Committee (England and Wales) consents to the Prisoners (Disclosure of Information About Victims) Bill, as amended in Committee and not amended on Report.—(Chris Philp.)

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I want to start by recognising the gravity of the issues that the Bill deals with and being extremely clear that it is not the intention of the Scottish National party in any way to make light of the legislation or diminish the seriousness with which consideration of it has been conducted so far. I want to offer our condolences to all the victims who have been described and congratulate the campaigners who have got us this far.

But we cannot allow a sitting of the Legislative Grand Committee (England and Wales)—what we refer to as the English Parliament—to go past completely unnoticed. The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan) said that he wants to see this legislation move as quickly as possible, as do I, yet here we are going through procedures that have been objected to several times and have proven themselves completely unnecessary, even with the amendments moved by the Government today.

I welcome the announcement you made earlier, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the practice of suspending the House for a period while certifications are made has been deemed by Mr Speaker today to no longer be necessary in these kinds of circumstances, where the consensus is clear. I hope that that represents an evolution of the English votes for English laws process and that such an evolution will continue.

2.45 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): My hon. Friend is right to recognise the gravity of the Bill, but he is also right that we cannot let this pass without recognising the absurdity of the EVEL process. It is good to have these reforms, but the only reform required when it comes to English votes for English laws is its abolition, to get rid of this nonsense that we have to subject ourselves to on an ongoing basis. Does he agree that we have to look seriously at what progress we can make on abandoning the idea of having two classes of Members of Parliament in this House?

Patrick Grady: Yes; my hon. Friend is right. The point that we have always made is that it should certainly not be for the Government, and it should not have to fall to the Chair either, to decide what matters are or are not important to our constituents. It should be for those of us in Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Minister has moved a consent motion, and it will be for the Committee to decide whether to consent, but I hope that we do not have to find ourselves in this situation too often in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

The occupant of the Chair left the Chair to report the decision of the Committee (Standing Order No. 83M(6)).

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair; decision reported. Third Reading

2.47 pm

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

As Members know, the Bill ensures that the non-disclosure of information about a victim's remains or their identity, and the reasons for that non-disclosure, are fully considered by the Parole Board when making a release decision. It is then for the Parole Board, which is an independent body, to decide what bearing such information has on the risk that a prisoner may present and whether that risk can be managed safely in their community. The Bill reflects the established practice of the Parole Board, as included in its guidance to panel members in 2017, but it goes an important step further in placing a legal duty to take the non-disclosure into account. This is part of the Government's intention to provide a greater degree of reassurance to victims' families by formally setting out that guidance in law.

This important Bill responds directly to real-life issues that we know have caused and continue to cause immense distress to families of victims of serious crimes. I see in the Chamber my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn)—I will call him my hon. Friend on this occasion—who has assiduously campaigned with the McCourt family to ensure that today has become a reality. I pay tribute to him for that, as I did on Second Reading. I also see the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who brought to bear his grave concerns relating to a case in his constituency, which resulted in the expansion of the Bill to encompass the horrendous circumstances in which many of his constituents tragically found themselves as a result of material non-co-operation. I pay tribute to them, and indeed to all hon. Members who over the past few years have campaigned hard to make sure that this Bill was introduced.

It is imperative that we protect the public from potentially dangerous offenders. Those offenders who do not disclose the whereabouts of a victim's remains or the identity of the victims in indecent images must be thoroughly assessed, and the non-disclosure must always be taken into account. We can all agree about the importance of stipulating in statute that appalling circumstances such as those addressed in this Bill must be fully taken into account by the Parole Board when making any decisions on the release of such an offender. It is clearly in the public interest that all elements of a prisoner's release are given consideration, and in turn, it is in the interests of the Parole Board to be able to rely on statutory provision about always considering the relevant non-disclosure of information in its release assessments.

I extend my thanks to everybody who has helped to prepare this Bill, particularly the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), for his hard and detailed work, and the Bill team for their strenuous efforts. Most importantly, to all those families affected by such despicable crimes, I pay warm and heartfelt tribute. I hope they will be able to take some comfort from knowing that their dedication

provides some hope for other families affected by the cruel and heartless actions of those who refuse to disclose vital information. On behalf of all those families and victims, I thank you. I appreciate the positive engagement with and cross-party support for the principles in this Bill and the Department's help with the progress that we have made. I commend this Bill to the House.

2.52 pm

Bambos Charalambous: I would like to join the Secretary of State in thanking all hon. Members for their contributions and for the tone they have set throughout the Second Reading and Committee debates.

I again give my thanks to Marie McCourt for her tireless work in making sure that this Bill—Helen's law—has come before Parliament. Its first form was a private Member's Bill brought in by my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), and a version of that Bill has now been picked up by the Government, taking us to where we are now. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) for leading the community campaign to incorporate the offences regarding indecent images in this Bill. This campaign followed the conviction of Vanessa George, who refused to disclose the identities of the children she abused.

There can be few things worse than learning of the murder of a close relative and having to endure the living hell of how it happened. There is also the trauma of the trial and the painstaking detail that is raked over to ensure a conviction. I doubt that anyone grieving will be consoled by a guilty verdict and justice being done, although it may help in the coping process, but the never-ending turmoil of not having a body to lay to rest is one of the cruellest forms of emotional torture.

The body of Helen McCourt, murdered in 1988, has never been found. Her killer, who was released from prison four weeks ago, has never disclosed the whereabouts of her body. The pain and suffering of Helen's family sadly goes on, and if it is any comfort to Marie McCourt, this Bill passing into law will be a fitting tribute to her campaign in her daughter's memory. It is equally distressing not knowing if your child has been the victim of the sharing of indecent images. The appalling abuse perpetrated by Vanessa George has been compounded by her refusal to disclose which of the children in her care were the subjects of indecent images.

Both Ian Simms, who was given a life sentence for the murder of Helen McCourt, and Vanessa George, who was convicted for sharing images of children at the nursery where she worked, have now been released on licence by the Parole Board. The unbearable suffering that Ian Simms and Vanessa George have caused, and continue to cause by the nondisclosure of information about their victims, endures.

At present, the only way a victim could have made their views known about a potential release on licence by the Parole Board would have been by making a witness statement to the Parole Board or seeking a reconsideration of the decision within 21 days. Both these avenues would require the victims to be proactive, invariably having to relive the distressing experience of the crime and to justify their reasons for objecting to the release. This Bill makes it a requirement for the Parole Board, for the offences stated in this Bill, to take

into account the prisoner's conduct in not disclosing information about victims and in prolonging the pain and suffering.

While a duty is owed to victims by the Parole Board, it does not go far enough in my view, and the victims code certainly needs revamping. The Parole Board's decisions can have a profound effect on victims and prisoners alike, and no decision should be taken lightly. The fact that the Parole Board can place conditions on the release of a prisoner does not in my view go far enough, and it cannot address wilful refusal in relation to the non-disclosure of information. Let us be clear: the Bill does not extend a prisoner's sentence, but it makes it clear that non-disclosure must be a factor in assessing the fitness of a prisoner to be released and their potential risk to the public.

In Committee and on Second Reading, hon. Members told us of their own experiences and of cases involving their constituents where the pain and suffering had been exacerbated by the conduct of the prisoner or their experience of dealing with the Parole Board. There are still issues to be resolved regarding the Parole Board, such as the transparency of its decision making, the lack of information given to victims, the lack of emotional and practical support available to victims throughout the whole process, and even keeping people up to date with decisions about a prisoner's release. There are many areas of improvement that need to be looked at in relation to how victims are treated. Although they are outside the scope of this Bill, they are matters that need to be viewed in tandem with the Bill.

The debate and discussion we have had on this Bill shows Parliament at its best—when we are working together with a united purpose for a common good. While this Bill will not assist us in finding the whereabouts of Helen McCourt's body or identifying the images of the children abused by Vanessa George, the measures in this Bill will, I hope, provide added pressure on prisoners to think again when refusing to disclose information about their victims. The Opposition will be supporting this Bill.

2.57 pm

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): People in places like St Helens—good, decent, honest, hard-working people—expect us in this place to do what is right by them, to work in the national interest and to do together what is patently obviously right. I think, therefore, that this is a good day for the House, and a day that so many victims across the country will recognise as one on which the Government have played their role, working with the Opposition, in doing something that will alleviate a great deal of the pain and suffering felt by victims in the cases that have been referenced throughout the progress of this Bill through the House.

In the case of my constituent Marie McCourt, that is of course the murder of her daughter Helen, and today is bitter-sweet. She has been a quiet, dignified, but very tenacious champion, and I am sure the Secretary of State, the Minister and their predecessors can attest to the strength of her determination on this, but it is bitter-sweet because the murderer of her daughter has already been released. However, as I said on Second Reading, it is a testament to the character of Marie McCourt that her campaign continued, despite the knowledge that that was likely to happen, so that other families would not have to suffer.

Stephen Metcalfe: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Conor McGinn: I will, of course.

Stephen Metcalfe: I say “hon. Friend” because on this issue we have worked closely together. Will he accept my thanks for his leadership on this issue, for working so hard to make sure that this did not fall off the agenda and for making sure that today did actually happen? On behalf of my constituent Linda Jones, Marie McCourt and the others, we are grateful to the House for bringing this forward.

Conor McGinn: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much not just for his words in the Chamber today, but for the co-operation we have had over the last three or four years in continuing to ensure that this agenda was to the fore. I also recognise that officials from the Department have not just delivered on this Bill and spent painstaking hours going through all the legalese required, but have met me and the family over the course of many years.

I pay particular tribute to the Secretary of State and the Minister. They made a promise to the McCourt family, and they kept it. They consistently and continually worked with the family, and they showed a great deal of empathy and support. They did much behind the scenes to ensure that Marie, John, Michael, and all the McCourt family felt sure that this Bill would be passed, as it has been. In Northern Ireland, Charlotte Murray's family are hoping to change the law there, and in Scotland the family of Suzanne Pilley hope to do the same. This is unfinished business in a legislative sense for the rest of the UK, and we hope that those legislatures will act accordingly.

For 31 years, the community in Billinge has prayed at St Mary's Catholic church for Helen McCourt and the return of her remains, and those prayers continue. I know that Members across the House send their sympathy and solidarity to Marie McCourt, on a day on which she can rightly take pride, although that, of course, does not return the remains of her beloved Helen.

Question put and agreed to,

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Terms and Conditions of Employment

3.1 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): I beg to move,

That the draft Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay (General) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 23 January, be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): With this it will be convenient to consider the draft Parental Bereavement Leave Regulations 2020.

Paul Scully: The statutory instruments implement a new entitlement to paid leave for employees who lose a child under the age of 18, or whose baby is stillborn. There is currently no specific statutory right to take time off work to grieve following the loss of a child, and although there are many excellent and supportive employers, some sadly do not extend the same compassion to their employees when these tragic circumstances occur. The SIs will ensure a statutory minimum provision on which all working parents can rely in the event of a child death or stillbirth. They will also establish a clear baseline of support for employers when managing bereavement in the workplace. Fortunately, the number of child deaths is relatively small—every year, there are around 7,500 child deaths in Great Britain, including stillbirths—but behind each individual death of a baby or child, there are parents, and a wider family, for whom the sadness and pain of that loss are unquantifiable.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): It is right that the provisions address the death of a child who has been placed for adoption, meaning that the adult who intended to adopt that child will be covered by them. Why have adults in such a situation been excluded if an objection to the adoption has been raised? Surely the grief will be no less whether or not the adoption is unopposed, yet the regulations specifically exclude an adult from receiving the provision if there had been an objection to the proposed adoption.

Paul Scully: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his question. A lot of consideration went into how to define bereaved parents, and we have extended the provisions, after a discussion following the introduction of the private Member's Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). Hopefully, I will be able to develop that point as we continue our debate, and perhaps answer my right hon. Friend's question.

I am conscious that many Members have personal experience of the issue, or stories of constituents who have been through this. I admire the bravery and honesty that they have displayed when speaking about the issue in the Chamber, and I hope that they will be proud of their contribution to effecting this change in the law. I extend special thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton for promoting the original Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Bill, and to my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) for his work to raise the profile of the issue in Parliament.

The draft Parental Bereavement Leave Regulations 2020 will give all employees a right to a minimum of two weeks off work in the event of their child's death or

stillbirth, regardless of how long they have worked for their employer. The draft Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay (General) Regulations 2020 implement a new statutory payment for parents who are taking time away from work following their bereavement, subject to the same eligibility criteria as all other statutory family leave payments.

The impact assessment that was published alongside the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act 2018 set out that the impact on business is small, at approximately £1.2 million per year. That is unchanged by the content of the draft SIs. The policy has undergone thorough consultation with the public and stakeholders representing bereaved parents and employers. The views expressed by Members during the passage of the 2018 Act have also been taken into account. I will now set out how the Government have decided to exercise the powers given to them through that Act.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Before the Minister continues, may I withdraw the awkward question that I put to him earlier, as I find that it is adequately answered in part 3 of the relevant regulations?

Paul Scully: I thank my right hon. Friend for his diligent examination of the papers before him. I am glad he is informed.

The regulations define a "bereaved parent" in broad terms by reference to the employee's relationship to the child. That reflects the diversity of existing family structures, taking account of biological and adoptive parents, as well as certain foster carers and kinship carers. As far as possible, we have sought to base the definition on facts that are easily identifiable to the employee and their employer.

Bereaved parents will be able to take two weeks' leave from their job, and they will have the choice of whether to take those weeks consecutively or non-consecutively. The regulations provide a window of 56 weeks, beginning with the date of death, in which the entitlement can be exercised. Bereaved parents will therefore be able to take time off in the immediate aftermath of the death, at a later point—for example around the first anniversary of the death—or on both occasions, as they see fit.

Consistent with other rights to family-related leave, the employee will be required to give notice to their employer before taking parental bereavement leave, and such notice can be given orally. The notice required for leave will vary depending on when leave is taken in relation to the date of death or stillbirth. A very short notice period is required for leave taken soon after the death, whereas one week's notice is required for leave taken later in the 56-week window. In both cases, the notice required for leave is designed to be minimal and to place as little burden on the employee as possible.

To claim statutory parental bereavement pay, the employee must provide notice to their employer in writing. Notice for pay can be given after the leave has been taken, so requirement will not create a barrier to a bereaved parent taking time off. In no circumstances will an employee be required to produce their child's death or stillbirth certificate to access that entitlement. The regulations mean that no evidence is required for a parent to exercise their right to take leave, but to be eligible for pay, an employee will be required to provide

minimal evidence. Such evidence will be a written self-declaration that they meet eligibility conditions regarding their relationship with the child, together with confirmation of their name and the date of the child's death or stillbirth.

Throughout my remarks, I have referred to employees, because parental bereavement leave and pay are employment rights, so individuals who have a different employment status will not qualify. That is consistent with all other statutory parental leave and pay entitlements.

The provisions in the statutory instruments will provide bereaved parents with an important space to grieve following the death or stillbirth of their child. The change in the law will also send a signal to employers about the importance and value of recognising bereavement and of providing adequate support for parents in such circumstances. I commend the regulations to the House.

3.9 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): We are here today to debate the establishment of statutory parental bereavement leave and pay arrangements following Royal Assent to the Bill known as Jack's law, in memory of Jack Herd. I pay tribute to his mother, Lucy, who will today see her work reach its concluding stages.

I am sure that Members on both sides of the House welcome the introduction of these measures, and I thank those from all parties who have advanced the need to establish bereavement leave and pay. Over the past few years, Members have recalled their own personal grief at the loss of a child or a stillbirth. The pain, the heartache and the impact are personal, but those who have had to face such sadness need a state that provides universal support to parents. In particular, I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who has powerfully shared her own circumstances following the loss of her son and has forced Parliament to take a fresh look at bereavement, and the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), my North Yorkshire colleague, who took the private Member's Bill through the House.

I know that trade unions and businesses also welcome these measures. The Opposition believe that this is a first step, and one that we hope to build on as better understanding of grief and bereavement is acknowledged. While the provisions make adjustments for a period of two weeks, for those who have experienced loss, bereavement can last a lifetime. We need employers to look at what more can be done to support workers at difficult times.

I want to raise a number of issues regarding the regulations. The statutory instrument on pay applies only to employees. Clearly, the measure is welcome, but it means that not all workers, as the Minister said, can access the provisions. Regulation 11 of the draft Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay (General) Regulations 2020 defines who would be entitled and who would be excluded, but will the Minister set out how he plans to address this inequality? Labour is clear: we would want to create a single status of "worker" to which all provisions would apply.

How will the Government ensure that bereaved parents in precarious work, including those on zero-hours contracts, can access two weeks' statutory bereavement leave? While the provision for a statutory period of leave applies to all employees, the regulations that come into effect on 6 April 2020 make provision for statutory pay to apply only to those who have completed six months

of service. However, bereavement and loss do not respect timelines. If someone loses their baby or child in their first six months of employment, the provisions should be extended to them. The loss is as great, and the need for leave and support as necessary.

The fact that the ability to take leave will, for some, be without pay means that those with the fewest means might not be able to afford to take it. Will the Minister set out why there is a limitation for those who have worked for less than six months and will he review it? While the regulations make provision for leave and pay for parents who lose a baby through stillbirth or who lose a child up to the age of 18, what provision has been made for parents who experience baby loss earlier in pregnancy? Further work should be done in this area.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for her kind comments earlier. She will acknowledge that, as the Minister said, this is a signal to employers. It is not simply a case of, "This is what you have to give." She will agree that most employers are considerate in such circumstances and will go much further than the regulations require. This is the floor that we will work from, rather than the ceiling.

Rachael Maskell: I thank the hon. Member for his comments. He is absolutely right that this should be the beginning of a much broader conversation with all employers, whatever the circumstances in which they employ their staff.

It is believed that 10,200 parents each year will be eligible for statutory parental bereavement leave, with 9,300 eligible for statutory parental bereavement pay, so about 1,000 parents a year will not be entitled to the pay provision. Will the Minister look again to see if day one provision could be extended specifically in that area?

I further seek to clarify that under the provisions of regulation 8 of the draft Parental Bereavement Leave Regulations 2020, two weeks' statutory parental bereavement leave could commence following a completed period of maternity or paternity leave, provided that the two weeks' allowance is used within 56 weeks of the loss of a baby or child. Labour believes that ensuring that all workers have day one rights would recognise that loss is loss and bereavement is bereavement. Arbitrary timescales should not come into this. While we would extend day one rights to all areas of employment law, it is important that the position is revisited for bereavement pay.

I also trust that employers will recognise the strength of these arguments and seek to go further when implementing these provisions. Good employment focuses on taking care of the holistic needs of the workforce, most acutely at the time of greatest need. We need to provide more time, time spread over a longer period, full pay, and support at key times, for instance on anniversary days. I trust that employers will be compassionate in making the fullest offer to staff, should they experience the loss of a baby or child.

Of course, bereavement brings its own patterns of grief, and time is necessary to come to terms with such loss. I hope that the Government will revisit this shortly, perhaps in the forthcoming employment Bill. The loss of a parent can often involve people having to take many additional practical measures to manage the parent's estate or belongings, such as clearing a property. Bereavement leave could therefore be extended.

[*Rachael Maskell*]

Research shows that not all parents are aware of their rights. For instance, 58% of those in low-paid work are not aware of what they are entitled to, and 63% are not aware of the right to unpaid parental leave, according to the TUC. Some have been found to use sick leave to address a family caring responsibility. That highlights the fact that from 6 April, not all parents will be aware of the changed provisions. Will the Government put in place a systematic approach so that parents can learn about these new measures? While we would hope that employers will inform their staff, may I suggest that NHS and hospice staff, as well as registrars for deaths, are briefed on the new provisions?

From 6 April this year, bereaved parents will have some time and support to manage the difficult days and weeks following the loss of their baby or child. This is a first step, and the Opposition will support the regulations today.

3.17 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. While I very much appreciate what Government and Opposition Members have said, the credit and inspiration for the legislation certainly does not belong to me. They belong to many other people, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), who tried to introduce such a measure in a previous Parliament. I was simply lucky enough to come top of the ballot for private Members' Bills, after which he was one of the first people to ring me. I was aware of his campaign as a result of many debates in Parliament and I had heard many Members speak about their own personal tragedies, so it was an absolute pleasure to be able to take on the baton and do what I could to introduce the legislation. At the election, both political parties committed to implement it, and the Government and Opposition have both been hugely supportive in doing so quickly.

Some of my constituents drew my attention to their own tragedies. Annika and James Dowson very sadly lost their little daughter, Gypsy, who was stillborn. It is touching that many people who have experienced these tragedies have turned their energies to fighting for something that is positive and good. Annika and James raised money for a bereavement ward at Scarborough Hospital. Anyone who has been on a ward and thinks of the experience of someone who has lost a child yet sees children in their first days, with all the happiness around that, while they are facing tragedy, can understand the need for bereavement suites. Luke and Ruthie Heron lost their little child, Eli, who was born at 23 weeks and six days. Had he not lived for another two and a half days, his birth would have been categorised as a miscarriage, rather than a stillbirth. We all come across these terrible tragedies.

I pay tribute to Lucy Herd and her little son, Jack, who was nearly two when he passed away—a tragic occurrence—and it is right that we can refer to this legislation as Jack's law. Initially, because of my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, we were going to refer to "Will's Bill", but Jack's law is a far more fitting tribute to the campaign that has been run. Many other people have supported this, and I am so appreciative of Opposition and Government Members' support in getting the Bill through. It went through in record time—we had to squeeze it in before the end of a parliamentary Session.

When people are told about such legislation, they are hugely shocked that it was not on the statute book already. However, nine out of 10 employers would be hugely considerate in such circumstances and a great number of them would give people whatever time off they needed to grieve, quite rightly. In many cases, employers would offer full pay during that time so that people could hopefully get over some of the grief and move on. This is not just about the individual; it is also about the signal that employers can send to the rest of their workforce, because showing compassion at such times is simply good employment practice.

I thank Members on both sides of the House, Opposition and Government Front Benchers and successive Business Secretaries, who have been so supportive in taking the legislation forward. I also mention the former Member for Stourbridge, Margot James, who was hugely supportive in making sure that we got the Bill on to the statute book quickly. I am grateful for the opportunity to be associated with this legislation and I wish it a speedy passage through the House.

3.21 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): It is no surprise that these parental bereavement pay and leave measures are warmly welcomed across the House and across the United Kingdom. Several of us in the House have had the tragic and life-changing experience of having to bury our own child. We talked much about this during the Committee stage of the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act 2018 in the previous Session of Parliament. We all understood not only the importance of the measures but that they were not for us—they were for all those men and women who in the future will have to undergo this agony. We in public life who have gone through this terrible experience have a duty—I believe it is a sacred and moral duty—to improve the situation for those who, in time to come, will suffer the same terrible fate of losing a child. I also pay tribute to the former Member for Eddisbury, Antoinette Sandbach; although she is no longer a Member of this House, she did much work on parental bereavement and baby loss, and it is important to remember that.

The legislation is non-partisan and that is exactly as it should be. It is no secret that, while I wholeheartedly support these measures, as far as they go—I hear what the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) said about this being an opening salvo in perhaps more comprehensive protection for bereaved parents—I do not think that they go far enough. But they are a start. The measures started life as that most fragile thing—a private Member's Bill—and it is down in no small part to the hard work led by the hon. Member who sponsored the original Bill that they have come this far.

These measures right a wrong; they correct the injustice that bereaved parents who bury their son or daughter are, under the law, not entitled to any paid or unpaid time off work. Any leave taken in such circumstances was entirely at the discretion of employers. We know that most employers would be hugely sympathetic to a member of staff facing such a loss, not just as an employer but as a fellow human being. We also know that others may not be, and we heard anecdotal evidence of such cases, particularly in the Bill Committee.

I was delighted that the amendment I tabled in the Bill Committee to cover parents who suffered a stillbirth was accepted—a clear sign of the careful and considered

cross-party working that took the Bill as far as it got. To face the death of a son or daughter with no entitlement to paid leave under the law has been for too long a terrible, terrible injustice that generations of people before us have suffered. I am proud that that has now been addressed.

These measures set out a minimum leave period of two weeks. That is not very long, but given that up to this point there was no entitlement at all, it is a start. Importantly, it provides legal recognition that the response to a life-changing event can and should no longer be a matter of discretion for employers. This is one of those days when we can feel that we are making a real, practical difference to the lives of our constituents as they face perhaps the worst experience that they can ever face.

People cope with the devastation of losing their child in a variety of ways, as we know—there is no right or wrong way to grieve or cope with loss. That is why I had hoped, through the passage of the legislation, for more flexibility on when the paid leave could be taken, but I take on board and very much welcome the Minister's comments a wee while back about flexibility, because it is very important. Parents need to grieve in their own way and in their own time as far as possible. The circumstances of the loss of a child will matter, and bereaved parents must have the full protection of the law. I hope that at some point the Government will revisit this to develop it into a more sensitive package than it currently is.

I also wanted these measures to cover offspring beyond the age limit of 18 years, as set out in the provisions. The measures are, after all, about bereaved parents and not the child who has been lost. This really ought not to be about the circumstances or the age at which the child is lost; it is about protecting the parents following the loss of a son or daughter—something that goes against the natural order of events.

These provisions are extremely welcome, but I look forward to the day—I hope the Minister is listening—when their scope is expanded in the ways I have set out. I will continue to work towards that end with anybody who is willing to work with me, for the sake of my own son who was stillborn at full term, baby Kenneth.

3.27 pm

Paul Scully: I thank all hon. Members for their consideration of these SIs and for their valuable contributions to the debate. I hope that Members on both sides of the House can agree that they are essential to ensure that no employed parent faces the prospect of returning to work too soon after the tragic loss of a child, should they need time away to grieve.

We are giving parents an important choice through the SIs, allowing them to decide what is best for their needs. They might otherwise have been reliant on the good will of their employer—as we have heard, it has not always been the case that employers have shown that goodwill. The provisions in the SIs strike the right balance between the needs of bereaved parents and those of their employers, who will administer the new entitlement.

My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), who is no longer in his seat, withdrew his question, but it is important that people listening understand what we are doing for adoptive

parents. He asked why someone who had applied for an adoption order but had their application rejected would not qualify. The grief experienced by an individual in such circumstances would affect them greatly, and an adoptive parent would qualify from the point at which the child was placed with them for adoption, irrespective of whether the application was rejected, if the child had been living with them for four weeks or more and had been cared for by them during that time. The four weeks is important because it covers other definitions as well so as to be as inclusive as possible.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) asked about inequalities between different types of worker. The Government understand the challenges that the self-employed and other non-employees face following bereavement. These challenges are different from those faced by employed parents but clearly no less demanding. The parental leave and pay policy focuses on support for employed parents, as they have less autonomy and flexibility over the time they can take off work, but we continue to keep the differences in treatment between self-employed and employed people under review with respect to parental leave and pay. As she also mentioned, with the employment Bill coming up, we will soon be talking about wider issues relating to the different statuses of employment and working.

The hon. Lady asked about day one provisions for pay. The regulations seek to mirror the existing regime of parental statutory pay entitlements to ensure that the new entitlement is familiar to both employees and employers from day one. The provision is a statutory minimum, as we have heard; we would expect employers to go further whenever they can.

Rachael Maskell: Does the Minister agree that the bereavement measures relate to circumstances very different from those relating to other measures and that the regulations do not reflect the true nature of grief and the support people need, particularly if they have been employed for less than six months? Will he go back and review this please?

Paul Scully: We will keep all these matters under review and see how they are working. The hon. Member is right to say that bereavement is an incredibly difficult issue. We want to ensure a safety net, a bare minimum—employers should not see this as the benchmark; it is the bare minimum they should offer. Any reasonable employer should seek always to do what is best and to value their employees as human beings at every level in terms of pay and benefits.

The hon. Lady asked about extending these provisions in the upcoming employment Bill to cover the loss of a parent. As I say, the Government have been clear that this is a statutory minimum, but we hope it will trigger improvements in workplace support for all kinds of bereavement. I would encourage all employers to engage with the ACAS guidance that supports employers in these circumstances.

The hon. Lady asked about a systematic approach to ensuring parents are informed of their new rights, including by briefing NHS staff. I agree that it is important that any benefits are clearly signposted. The last thing parents will be thinking about at such a time will be their rights and responsibilities, so the easier it is to do the right thing, the better. We have worked closely with stakeholders

[Paul Scully]

to make them aware of the new entitlement, including Sands, the charity, which already works closely with hospitals to provide support to parents following a stillbirth or neonatal death, and we will publish guidance on the new entitlement once the legislation is passed.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for bringing her personal experience to bear and for seeking changes. I congratulate her on getting her amendment through to extend the provisions to include stillbirth. I hope she can take comfort from knowing that her experience has brought about real change to the lives of grieving parents and to our ability to address these matters further in years to come. She asked about extending the provisions to children over the age of 18. Clearly, bereavement is the same no matter the age—losing a child at any age is devastating—and the question where to draw the line for the purposes of the parental bereavement leave and pay policy has been a difficult consideration. We have consulted with stakeholders representing bereaved parents and employers, and they recognised that the measure needed to be deliverable and affordable. It was accepted that 18 was the most natural threshold for the new entitlement. Moreover, grief affects all family members, not just parents, and so with ACAS and Cruse we will continue to explore the best way to encourage employers to act sympathetically to requests for leave in relation to any bereavement.

The Government are committed to supporting working parents and to making this country the best place in the world in which to work and grow a business. These statutory instruments will ensure that bereaved parents have a minimum statutory provision on which to rely if they ever have to go through the unimaginable tragedy of losing a child or baby, and I hope that the House will approve them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay (General) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 23 January, be approved.

Resolved,

That the draft Parental Bereavement Leave Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 23 January, be approved.—(Paul Scully.)

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXTRADITION

That the draft Extradition Act 2003 (Amendments to Designations) Order 2020, which was laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

SOCIAL SECURITY

That the draft Employment Allowance (Excluded Persons) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 16 January, be approved.

HOUSING

That the draft Client Money Protection Schemes for Property Agents (Approval and Designation of Schemes) (Amendment) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 3 February, be approved.

CRIMINAL LAW

That the draft Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (Commencement No. 14) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 14 October 2019, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

That the draft Scotland Act 1998 (Transfer of Functions to the Scottish Ministers etc.) Order 2020, which was laid before this House on 31 October 2019, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(David Rutley.)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Funding for Calderdale's flood recovery

3.36 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): We have faced almost unprecedented floods in Calderdale, only second to those that we faced in 2015. The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Calderdale was devastated by flooding for the second time in less than 5 years by Storm Ciara, affecting more than 600 homes, 587 businesses and 8 schools; and further that funding which was made available from Central government towards Calderdale's recovery in 2015 has not been forthcoming.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to commit to a reallocation of funding to ensure a resilience grant and business rate waiver scheme for homes and businesses to match that made available in 2015; further that Calderdale is granted 'Tier 1' status based on our ongoing management of flood risk which is reflected in a budget uplift; further that the Government should reallocate funds to ensure that Calderdale receives an infrastructure recovery fund to respond to the huge range of infrastructure repairs required; and further that the Government makes it policy to ensure that funding raised by the Community Foundation for Calderdale's 2020 flood appeal is matched by central Government, as it was in 2015, to repair the damage caused by storm Ciara.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002561]

Animal shelter in Wood Green

3.37 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents, who are very concerned about the proposed closure of the animal welfare centre in Wood Green, which has been extant for nearly 100 years. In fact, thousands of people have contacted me about it.

I am sure you will appreciate, Mr Deputy Speaker, the concern that is felt in a community where so many have volunteered—or, perhaps, have not been able to afford to maintain the care of their beloved pets, and have brought them to the Wood Green animal shelter over the years—and the desperation and sense of loss resulting from the charity's proposal to close the shelter. It has such an important function, particularly in Wood Green, where the loss of young people's opportunities to volunteer and to connect with animals by looking after, caring for or petting them would be a matter of extreme concern.

I am proud to present this petition to the House, and I know that it will have cross-party support, because so many Members are committed to the welfare of animals. I present it on behalf of all my constituents, but the lead petitioner, Buffy Collett-Bell, a young person studying

at the College of Haringey, Enfield and North East London, has been particularly active in promoting the rights of animals, the right to animal welfare and the right for Wood Green to continue to have this desperately needed animal shelter, which will soon reach its 100th anniversary. I hope that the petition will be viewed positively.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Hornsey and Wood Green,

Declares that the future of the Wood Green Animals Shelter should be safeguarded; notes the significant and long lasting history of the shelter and the charity in the community; further notes the current Charity are seeking to close the shelter in the near future; further notes that a public petition by residents across the UK, organised by Catherine West MP and local residents, has attracted over 2,000 signatures in support of safeguarding the future of the shelter.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to press upon Wood Green, the Animals Charity, to stay in the Wood Green Area and maintain the operation of the shelter, and to safeguard its long-term position.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002563]

Climate Protests in Cambridge: Police Response

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

3.39 pm

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I would not have asked for this Adjournment debate if I thought the issues arising from policing in Cambridge during the recent climate protests were of merely local interest, or related only to events in the past, but they are issues of national importance. Police forces across the country will have to grapple with them as the protests spread to other towns and cities, as they inevitably will. We have had London and Cambridge—where next? Far from being confined to the past, it seems to me that we are at the start of protests that are likely to escalate in frequency, duration and severity. There is widespread public anger about the events in Cambridge and deep concern among many of my fellow MPs. We have reached a situation in the UK where the police sometimes no longer believe that they have a right to stop blatant criminality during political protests. The issues raised by events in Cambridge need to be resolved. The powers of the police must be clarified, and the police must have the confidence to use them. Otherwise, we risk undermining the rule of law and even public support for the police.

On 16 February, Extinction Rebellion activists started a week of protests in Cambridge that initially involved a blockade of two major roads into Cambridge, preventing vehicles from getting in and out of the city and forcing ambulances carrying patients and other emergency vehicles to be re-routed. The blockade remained in place for a week. Blockading a road is an offence under section 137 of the Highways Act 1980, but the police did not uphold the law and open the roads. Instead, they used emergency powers to close the roads legally, thereby giving protection to the blockades. The police were usually present during the blockades, but to protect the activists from angry members of the public.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that a key issue here is the role of the College of Policing, which actually stated that blocking the public highway was not unlawful? It instructed the police in that way. Does not this also link in with a recent case in which advice from the College of Policing led to a situation where Harry Miller was visited by police on his doorstep to question his thinking on societal issues? Is it not time for the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office to look at the role of the College of Policing and the way in which it is unfortunately leading to skewed police priorities?

Anthony Browne: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I shall come later to the issue of the advice from the College of Policing.

On 18 February, the protesters, armed with spades, dug up the lawn at Trinity College. They then proceeded to load soil into wheelbarrows and dump it in the foyer of Barclays bank—my branch of Barclays. Throughout this episode, Cambridgeshire police stood by and watched. They did not intervene to stop the criminal acts and no arrests were made at the time. The police said that they did not stop the criminal acts because they were concerned

[*Anthony Browne*]

that to do so would be an infringement of the activists' human rights. During the week, there were various acts of vandalism by activists, including at the iconic Schlumberger building and at a Shell petrol station. Subsequently, following public outrage and complaints from Trinity College, myself and Ministers, the police have arrested a total of nine activists.

The lack of police action against law-breaking protesters caused public fury across social media, the airwaves, the letters pages and my inbox. Virtually no one has argued that the police were right not to act. That public anger is very understandable. We rely on the police to uphold the rule of law, and not to let mob rule unfold. When those tasked with law enforcement appear to be unwilling or unable to intervene in flagrant criminal conduct, the public start to feel threatened. The public are also annoyed by the perceived double standard. Many said to me, "If I had blockaded the road or committed criminal damage, I'd be arrested on the spot. Why aren't the protesters?" I want to put on record that I strongly support the ultimate objective of Extinction Rebellion in combating climate change, but I do not support its means.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Taking into consideration the fact that a number of my constituents attend Cambridge and study there at this time, I am sure that the hon. Member will share my concern that, at what should have been a peaceful expression of opinion, tensions were heightened deliberately by a few. Does he agree that now is the time for calm heads and cool words and that that must be the first line of defence when dealing with passionate young people?

Anthony Browne: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. As I have said, my aim is not to inflame things, but to ensure that the police have clarity on their powers to act. I also strongly support the police, who I recognise are caught between a rock and a hard place. I know that fundamentally they want to uphold the law, but the guidance and interpretation can be confusing.

There are two questions that need answering: first, why did the police stand by as crimes were committed; and secondly, what can be done to ensure that they will uphold the law in future? I have met the police and crime commissioner and the chief constable of Cambridgeshire, who are now conducting a review of the lessons learned. It is not clear that the police would do anything differently if it happened again. They are sharing the learnings with other police forces across the country that are developing their own plans in case of similar protests. Cambridgeshire police have welcomed this Adjournment debate, as they hope it will help generate agreement on how they should respond in future. I know that, following the Extinction Rebellion protests in London, the Metropolitan police are also considering these issues with Home Office officials.

Having considered the arguments carefully and examined the relevant legislation and court judgments, I believe that none of the reasons for police inaction stands up to scrutiny. I contend that the police did have legal grounds to act even under existing legislation.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a thoughtful speech. He and I were briefed at the end of last week, along with other Cambridgeshire

MPs. I, too, was outraged by the digging up of the lawn, but does he agree that there was a danger of a much bigger reaction being stimulated in the city? The city is proud of its protests, but was that not a real dilemma that the police faced?

Anthony Browne: The hon. Gentleman is right; it was a dilemma. In fact, I was just coming to the pragmatic arguments before moving on to the legal arguments.

The police point out that after a week of protests, no one was physically harmed, the protests did not escalate and there was no irreparable damage. That is all true, but if that is the police criterion for action to stop a crime, they would rarely enforce the law. Thousands of people's lives were disrupted and criminal damage was done.

The police have also said that Trinity College did not complain about the vandalism while it was taking place; it did so only later that evening. It was only after Trinity College lodged a complaint that the police made arrests. But the police would not stand by and watch a burglar rob a jewellery shop just because the owner was not there formally complaining about it.

Others have said—this relates to what the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) said—that the police should not arrest people because that would make them martyrs. Well, they have arrested some people, so will they become martyrs? Who knows, and actually what difference does it make? The martyr argument could be used to justify just about anything.

A far bigger and more realistic concern is that if activists know they can get away with breaking the law, the law breaking will escalate. They will do it again, and others will be tempted to join them. Many will be quite attracted to the idea of breaking the law in front of the police, making a mockery of them. Some will push the limits, committing ever greater crimes, until ultimately the police do stop them. In this situation, appeasement will just encourage more law breaking. The pragmatic arguments do not stand up.

We then come to the legal arguments. During the week of action, the police put out a video explaining why they were not acting to stop these crimes. It was based on their interpretation of the Human Rights Act 1998, as set out in guidance from the College of Policing, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) referred earlier. Under article 11 of the European convention on human rights, enshrined in UK law through the Human Rights Act, people have the right to peaceful assembly. I am sure that all Members of this House support that right—indeed, if it was threatened, I would be out there protesting for the right to protest.

As the College of Policing guidance points out, those rights are qualified rights, and the police can impose restrictions on demonstrations under certain circumstances. Those restrictions must be prescribed by law, necessary and proportionate. The law that allows the police to impose restrictions on processions and assemblies is set out in sections 12 and 14 of the Public Order Act 1986. It gives the police powers if they believe that a procession or assembly may result in

"serious public disorder, serious damage to property or serious disruption to the life of the community",

or if they believe that

"the purpose of the persons organising it is the intimidation of others".

The police believe that the Cambridge protests did not amount to “serious” disruption. I have been told that there is no case law on that, and that point was made by the police earlier. The Metropolitan police lost a judicial review following their imposition of restrictions on the Extinction Rebellion protests in London, but that was on an entirely different issue and is not relevant to this case. What I can say with certainty is that many members of the public feel the Cambridge protests caused them serious disruption and serious damage.

This also misses the point. On close scrutiny, the College of Policing guidance is poor, and the Cambridgeshire police interpretation of it is flawed. Sections 12 and 14 of the Public Order Act are clearly not meant to deter the police from arresting people for committing other crimes. They give the police powers to impose a legal restriction on the location or size of an assembly or procession if they think serious disorder is likely to result from it. Sections 12 and 14 absolutely do not say the police cannot arrest people for committing a crime in front of their eyes, as happened at Trinity College—that is clearly not the intent of the legislation. Even when the police cannot legally ban or restrict a whole demonstration, they can still arrest demonstrators who commit criminal damage. Even if we accept that the criminal damage was not serious, it just means the police could not use section 14 of the Public Order Act to ban the assembly overall. It does not mean the police could not have arrested those digging up the Trinity College lawn.

When it comes to the blockade of the road, I believe the police could have used section 14 powers relating to assemblies, rather than processions. Section 14(1)(b) says the police can impose restrictions on an assembly if “the purpose of the persons organising it is the intimidation of others with a view to compelling them not to do an act they have a right to do, or to do an act they have a right not to do”.

The intimidation does not have to be serious; it just needs to be the purpose of those organising the assembly. The very purpose of those blockading the Fen Causeway and Trumpington Street was to stop people travelling on them, which they had a right to do—at least, they had a legal right to do it until the police used their emergency powers to close the roads.

That clearly fits the description of intimidation under the Public Order Act. The purpose of the assembly was to intimidate the public in and around Cambridge to stop them using the roads, so the police had a right to impose a restriction on that assembly and to require that it be moved to a place that was not blocking the road. As the hon. Member for Cambridge knows, there are plenty of places in Cambridge where the protestors could have held their assembly without depriving people of their right to travel on the roads.

The police misinterpreted not only the Public Order Act but the European convention on human rights, which is explicit that the right to assembly does not give people the right to break the law or to deprive others of their rights or freedoms. Paragraph 2 of article 11 says:

“No restrictions shall be placed on the exercise of these rights”—
of assembly—

“other than such as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others. This Article shall not prevent the imposition

of lawful restrictions on the exercise of these rights by members of the armed forces, of the police or of the administration of the State.”

There it is, in black and white.

The Human Rights Act itself says that that Act cannot be used to stop the police imposing legal restrictions on assemblies.

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Member is making a powerful legalistic argument, but I put it to him that this is actually a political argument. There are many people in my constituency who think we face a climate emergency so serious that it justifies what would in normal times be considered extreme action. Does he understand how strongly people feel about this? The police have used these powers on the A14 diversions, and there has been less disruption for my constituents over the past few years than was suffered the other week.

Anthony Browne: I understand the passion, the urgency and the importance that people feel about climate change, but that does not justify breaking the law.

This is also clearly counterproductive. I have had lots of correspondence from my constituents, as perhaps the hon. Gentleman has had from his, saying that people cannot be won over to a cause by alienating them. If we want to make a political argument, I would say that Extinction Rebellion portrays itself as a fringe group with a fringe cause and actually undermines support for action on climate change. It must obey the law, which is the way to win people over.

I am close to finishing my legal arguments. The Human Rights Act also says that restrictions can be legally imposed on assemblies to prevent crime, as with the Trinity College lawn, or to protect the rights of others, as with the blockades.

In summary, there is nothing in law—in the Human Rights Act or in the Public Order Act—to stop the police upholding other laws.

The public are rightly angry that we have got ourselves into a position where the police believe that they cannot uphold criminal law. Why has this come about and what can be done about it? I believe the police fundamentally want to uphold the law but are beset by uncertainty, with one problem being that they get weak legal advice—that is the point my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) was making. Can something be done to improve the legal advice that police forces get and the advice from the College of Policing? The police are up against strong activist groups, which are often chasing them through the courts, always pushing to constrain the powers of the police, but no one is chasing the police through the courts to force them to uphold the law. Can the Government do something so that there is less one-sided pressure on the police?

I would like to ask the Minister whether the Home Office can undertake a public review to see what can be done to stop a repeat of the unfortunate events in Cambridge in other locations in the coming months and years. That might mean a change in the law, but, as I have said, I do not believe that is necessary. It would be good to have practical, deliverable proposals to help the police do their job. Never again should police feel they have to stand by and watch powerlessly as criminal acts take place. In future, the police must be able to do what they are employed to do: uphold the law.

3.55 pm

Mr Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): I rise to support the sentiments expressed so eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne). In doing so, I acknowledge that we face a conundrum. I believe that all Members in this House support the right to peaceful protest, and I do not think that anything said here today should diminish that right, but a balance needs to be struck, because certain pressure groups have extended that right to the point where they are abusing it. There is a danger that some of them are becoming a law unto themselves.

Speaking as a Member who represents a constituency within the boundaries of Greater London, I can say that London has had more than its fair share of this. Last year, in the first Extinction Rebellion protest, we saw a wholesale attempt to shut down the city of London, including major transport hubs. That had several impacts, which were all deliberately intended. The first was impact on the police themselves. I have spoken to my local borough commander, and he tells me that they had to extract an entire shift, one of the three they have, to send it to central London to provide cover and bolster the support provided simply to contain the level of protest. That has a knock-on effect back in the boroughs: they are unable to respond as speedily as they would otherwise; the watches they have on duty are massively overstretched; and local residents get a much worse service. The implication of that is a danger of crime spikes, and people's safety goes down significantly.

There is also an impact on the emergency services. In the areas where the protests were taking place ambulances were unable to get through, despite being on blue-light calls—that is scandalous. There was a huge economic impact in London. The cost of the protest just in terms of policing was in excess of £40 million. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire has said, there are dangers of this escalating. Just yesterday, people from Greenpeace took it upon themselves to superglue shut the doors of 85 Barclays bank branches and hammer nails into those doors to prevent them from being opened. That was on the first day of the month, so it had a big impact, not only on private customers but on business. Greenpeace is not known for that kind of direct action, so it is clearly an escalation based on what it saw Extinction Rebellion getting away with at the end of last year.

On a more sinister level is the escalation in reaction against these protests. When the police are standing by and being seen not to enforce the law, there is a great danger that local citizens will take it upon themselves to do so. We saw a clear example—it can still be seen on social media now—of what happened when Extinction Rebellion decided to stop people commuting in Canning Town. A protestor marching along the roof of a train was dragged off quite violently and received a kicking on the platform, apparently to the cheering applause of the people standing around. That is sinister. If that starts to happen and to get public approval, the danger is that this will become very significant. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) expressed the danger of what happens when hotheads take control; I have set out an example of what can happen, and it can only get worse.

Jim Shannon *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Just before the hon. Member intervenes, I remind everybody that the topic of the debate is the police response to climate protests in Cambridge. May we please ensure that we home in on that?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman has been careful in what he is saying, because it is about balance and respecting other people. Those who protest have to respect those they inconvenience.

Mr Bacon: I entirely agree; that sentiment should be shared completely. I come back to my opening remark about the right to peaceful protest: that needs to be respected on all sides, including by the protesters themselves. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire elucidated very eloquently, they have to respect the rights of other people. When they seek to trample on those rights, they increase the danger of escalation.

There is a problem for the police that is partly down to the state of the law. They are able to prohibit public processions such as marches—we have seen the cancellation by the police of proposed far-right marches because they felt that public safety could not be guaranteed—but that aspect of the Public Order Act 1986 does not extend to people who stay put somewhere, which relates to the right to assembly. Such people do not have to give six days' notice and do not have to declare where they are going to be. That is a weakness. The Metropolitan Police Commissioner—the most senior police officer in the country—has asked for the 1986 Act to be amended to take that into account, and that suggestion has been supported by Nick Ferrari on his LBC show, with his Enough Is Enough campaign. There is some merit in that position and I call on the Government to pay attention to it.

Another thing is required: over many years now, the police have tried to do a very difficult job without feeling that they have the political top cover to do it. There are myriad things—I could go off into all sorts of different examples of the failings of the Independent Office for Police Conduct and the risks that police officers have to run on a daily basis, but that would take us well off topic, so I shall not. In conjunction with the Government's looking at the 1986 Act, there needs to be a quid pro quo: the police need to be provided with political top cover, but in exchange we need the police to stand up and do their job, which is to enforce the law without fear or favour.

4.1 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Chris Philp): I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) to his place. I am delighted to see him in the House, as a much improved representative for South Cambridgeshire. I congratulate him on securing the debate and on the campaigning that he has already done, on this issue and others, in the few weeks since he was elected.

I entirely understand and appreciate that many Members are deeply concerned about the activities of Extinction Rebellion. Indeed, I seem to recall that in the previous Session, Extinction Rebellion protestors glued themselves to the glass screen in the Public Gallery while not wearing any clothes, which was an extremely disconcerting sight. I am glad that the House's business proceeded uninterrupted and unimpeded during that episode.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire said in his excellent speech, many of us—all of us, I am sure—understand and sympathise with the environmental issues being raised. No Government are doing more than this one to make sure that environmental concerns are being met. The United Kingdom has significantly reduced its CO₂ emissions, and I am proud that under this Government coal-fired power generation is now almost at zero, unlike in many other countries around the world, including Germany.

Daniel Zeichner: Strong points have been made about the law needing to be enforced, but the Government are continually dragged through the courts for failing to meet their air quality responsibilities, so when are we going to see Ministers pursued by the police to tackle the climate emergency? There cannot be one law for one set of people; surely it has to be the same law for everybody.

Chris Philp: The Government have an extremely proud record on climate change. As I have just said, we have been reducing our CO₂ emissions and have virtually eliminated coal-fired power stations. There is scope to do more, though, and the Environment Bill will again be before the House shortly, and it contains further measures, including on clean air, which I am extremely interested in as a London MP.

The country can be proud of its record on climate change and the Government will continue to do more. Moreover, the Government fully recognise, respect and embrace the right to peaceful protest. A free society is built on the foundations of free speech and free protest, and the Government will never do anything to impede the public's right to express their views. Indeed, we have seen that outside, in Parliament Square, on quite a frequent basis over the past year—sometimes quite noisily.

The Government are also clear that although we fully respect the right to peaceful protest, that does not extend, under any circumstances, to criminal behaviour. Some of the remarks that the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) made during his intervention a little earlier this afternoon seemed to come dangerously close to excusing criminal behaviour just because an issue is important. Let me reiterate: there is no excuse for criminal behaviour. It does not persuade the public of anything. In fact, it has the reverse effect, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire said in his speech. My hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Mr Bacon) said that, in fact, it risks vigilante behaviour by the public, which simply inflames the situation further. There is no excuse, under any circumstances, for this kind of criminal behaviour. The Government have an expectation that the police will always take action where criminal activity is under way. There would need to be an extremely good reason for them not to do so.

Daniel Zeichner: I am flabbergasted. Frankly, the Minister should know that crime has been taking place across the country, with criminals walking into shops and stealing goods, and it has been reported to the police on a daily basis and nothing has been done under this Government. Why is it not the same law for everybody?

Chris Philp: Clearly, a crime happening in front of the police is different from a crime being reported to the police. Obviously, every crime is investigated. Speaking from memory, some tens of thousands of people are prosecuted for theft and burglary every year. Of course, one reason why we are recruiting 20,000 extra police officers is to make sure that crimes can be even more thoroughly investigated than they are already. None the less, there is an expectation that the police will take action in relation to all crimes that they are aware of, particularly when the police have direct evidence in front of them that a crime is taking place.

In relation to the Trinity College incident, although arrests were not made immediately, subsequently, as one Member said, three protesters were arrested and charged with criminal damage. They have been released on bail and will appear at Cambridge magistrates court on 30 March. In relation to the incident at the Schlumberger oil service facility, a total of five people were arrested and charged with offences, including criminal damage, and again they will appear at Cambridge magistrates court on 30 March. In relation to the episode at the Shell petrol station, five arrests were made and four people were subsequently charged. The fact that people were arrested and charged is something that we can be pleased about.

Tom Hunt: Does the Minister agree that there appears to be an issue with the College of Policing? On many occasions, including on this one and also in the case of Harry Miller, the advice that it gives to the police is leading to skewed priorities for police forces.

Chris Philp: That is something that is always kept under careful review. My colleague, the Minister for Crime, Police and the Fire Service, is, unfortunately, at a conference this afternoon so cannot attend this debate, but I will ask him to write to my hon. Friend on that question. Perhaps the best thing is for him to write to my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire on this College of Policing question, just to explore it a little further.

In relation to police powers, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington, we have listened to police concerns regarding the challenges that they face managing protests. They have indicated that existing protest legislation can, in some places, be cumbersome, so Home Office officials have been working closely with senior Met officers and national policing leads to understand how we can make the existing public order legislation more effective if needed. That is ongoing at the moment.

In conclusion, we fully respect the right to peaceful protest. It is the foundation of our democracy, but that right does not include committing criminal acts, and we do expect the police to uphold the law. Once again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire for bringing this matter to the House's attention.

Question put and agreed to.

4.9 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 3 March 2020

[SIOBHAIN McDONAGH *in the Chair*]

Nursing Workforce Shortage: England

9.30 am

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the nursing workforce shortage in England.

It is a genuine pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I start by recognising the skills and expertise that nurses bring. Nursing shortages impact on patient care and staff wellbeing. Wherever there are people, there are nursing staff. They work in public services, across the NHS, social care, public health and the independent sector. They are with us at every stage in life, from birth to death. I am grateful for all that health and care staff do in my constituency and across the country.

This debate was secured in response to petitions handed in by nurses from the Royal College of Nursing, calling on the Government to fix the workforce crisis. I am pleased to be their voice—and that of everyone who works in the health profession—in Westminster today, and call on the Government to do all they can to tackle nursing shortages, which have huge knock-on effects on our NHS and wider health and care system, as well as on patient safety and staff wellbeing.

There are about 40,000 nursing vacancies in health and care services in England. In my region, the east of England, the nurse vacancy rate is 10.7%, which amounts to more than 3,600 nurses. Worryingly, the vacancy rate for mental health nurses in my region is even higher, at 15.3%. Nurses are crucial in health promotion and improving population health, yet the numbers of health visitors, school nurses, community nurses and district nurses have dropped at a rapid rate and are in long-term decline. We need to see significant growth in the NHS cancer workforce as well.

I expect that the Minister will tell me that almost 8,000 more nurses work in the NHS since this time last year. Although that figure is correct, it must, as with all stats, be viewed in the relevant context. That is a growth rate of just 0.4%, which is nowhere near the scale needed to provide enough nurses now or in the future. The pace of growth is not sufficient to reassure patients that we have a workforce ready to meet their needs, and it is nowhere near the rate needed to cope with the increasing demands that are predicted to be placed on the NHS by our ageing population.

For every NHS nurse employed in hospitals last year, there was an equivalent of 214 admissions. Patient need is rising faster than the growth in our nursing workforce. Social care and public health are also without thousands more nurses. It is difficult to calculate the number of vacancies in those settings because the data is incomplete. We have no understanding of plans to support and fund social care, which I hope the new Minister will confirm are a priority.

Nursing shortages directly impact on patient safety. Even with the small increase in staff numbers, hospitals and other services are struggling more than ever. Last week, the RCN published findings from a survey of emergency care nurses, who are increasingly forced to provide care in corridors. Some 95% of survey respondents said that patient dignity is compromised, and 92% worry that patients may be receiving unsafe care. December saw the worst performances on record for A&E departments in England, with every single department failing to meet the four-hour waiting time target. Those stats should alarm us all. Chronic underfunding has led us to this point.

Trust papers from Bedford Hospital, a district general in my area, show just how intense the pressures are on our frontline workers. Staff are doing as much as they can to keep patients safe and to provide high-quality care, but the situation is outside their control. Staffing shortages are systemic, and addressing them requires political will and action.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The hon. Gentleman mentions staffing shortages. My vast and remote constituency, which has a large and ageing population and is the most remote mainland constituency in the UK, has problems not only with recruitment but particularly with retention. Health is devolved to the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government, but as and when the UK Government develop an approach to keeping people in the most remote and rural areas, where they are needed most, I hope that that intelligence will be shared with the Scottish Government.

Mohammad Yasin: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. There are nursing shortages in every part of the country, and nurses are struggling to provide good care. I will come to that point in a moment.

Nursing shortages also impact on staff wellbeing. One testimony from an emergency nurse describes the realities of working in the profession:

“When I witnessed elderly patients being assisted onto bed pans while on ambulance trolleys, surrounded by paramedics, other patients on trolleys, and relatives all squashed in a freezing corridor...I realised that I can no longer preserve or protect my patient’s dignity, and that I am failing them as a nurse. Dignity is the first thing that the patients are stripped of when in a queue in a dark, cold corridor, closely followed by safety.”

Sharon, a community nurse who recently responded to a House of Commons digital debate on this Westminster Hall debate, said:

“I have worked in my locality for four and a half years. In that time, we have never been fully staffed. This puts enormous pressure on the whole team and many people have left because of it. Often, we are rushed, we forget things, and we cannot give the quality of care that we would like as we are just too thinly spread. Many of us end catching up on our notes or management at home, working way over our contracted hours. We are exhausted, frustrated and disappointed.”

This is an appalling situation for all concerned, and I know from these responses that this happens daily in hospitals up and down the country. Talk of a winter crisis is meaningless when staff and patients experience crisis every day, all year round. We must all focus on fixing this.

There is a long-term plan for the NHS, but its ambitions are dependent on having enough nurses. We have no funded workforce plan, even though it was promised by

[*Mohammad Yasin*]

the Government when they announced the funding allocations back in the summer of 2018. Will the Minister tell us when the long-promised NHS people plan will be published, and whether it will include bold and funded policies to recruit, train and retain vital nursing staff to meet the needs of our population?

Nursing students in England can receive grants of up to £5,000 a year, and for some they can go up to £8,000. However, these do not reflect the true cost of living. Just as importantly, tuition fees are also a huge burden on nursing students, and it is important that this is addressed in the forthcoming Budget. As a father of four, I believe that financial barriers to education must be removed.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes some important points about the pressures facing nursing in England and the cost of living. Does he agree that one way that this could be resolved is by supporting bursaries and offering more financial support to student nurses? The Welsh Labour Government have kept those throughout this entire period, ensuring that the bursary was not scrapped in Wales.

Mohammad Yasin: My hon. Friend is right. Cuts to bursaries have impacted hugely on the recruitment of new staff. The Welsh Government did the right thing in a difficult situation. If we do not look after our staff, it will be hard for them to stay in the profession. That is why we have a shortage of nurses.

As a father of four children, I believe that financial barriers to education must be removed so that everyone who wants to go to university can do so, particularly those who want to become nurses. We should encourage young people to train in these critical professions. Why are the Government putting up barriers to young people who will go on to contribute such vital services to society and saddling them with huge debts before they have begun working?

This problem has been years in the making. Such stark shortages do not occur out of the blue. In England these shortages are due to the complexities of political decisions and structural issues.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): As has been mentioned, these issues are compounded in rural areas, where we have problems with recruitment and retention. A cottage hospital called Stratton in my constituency has just had its minor injuries unit closed overnight due to nurse shortages. What more can we do to promote staff retention across the whole of the UK?

Mohammad Yasin: The Government must listen to nurses and the Royal College of Nursing. They are pleading for the Government to act now. Getting nursing bursaries back in action might help, but the problem is now so deep that we must take urgent action to tackle it.

This problem has been around for a long time. It is not a short-term problem. It will affect us in the long term unless we act now. Who is responsible for the health and care workforce? It is shocking that no one is. There is no clarity in law on the role of and responsibility and accountability for growing and developing our health and care workforce, or the various layers that drive our health and care services.

A nurse walking on to a short-staffed shift has no option but to carry on. The buck stops with them. They carry the professional, physical and emotional impact. Nurses have no power to recruit more staff. That is true of all professionals in our taxpayer-funded health and care services, including nurses, medics, physiotherapists, psychologists, social workers, support workers and many others. The Government should be accountable for the provision of the labour market that staffs our health and care services. The taxpayer must be assured that the services they have paid for are safe and effective.

The former MP for Wolverhampton South West, Eleanor Smith, who is also a nurse, was here last summer setting out the same concerns. This is the 37th debate on workforce issues in health and care services since 2017, and it will not be the last. In recent responses to parliamentary questions, the Government have considered the merits of safe staffing legislation and ways to close the workforce accountability gap. The Royal College of Nursing has been campaigning, along with several other health organisations, for accountability to be secured in legislation, so the Government's consideration is welcome.

The long-term plan Bill is the way to make progress on that agenda, but it must include an explicit framework for the role of and responsibility and accountability for workforce supply and planning at all levels at which decisions are made across the system, including the Government. Achieving accountability in law provides an opportunity to safely staff our health and care services in the future. I hope the Minister will commit to safe staffing legislation for England and update us on what her Department is doing to ensure that the NHS long-term plan Bill is forthcoming. Will that Bill explicitly provide for accountability for workforce provision?

I suspect the Minister will want to discuss the Government's promise of 50,000 more nurses over five years. We have heard a lot about that commitment but not in detail. How will 50,000 more nurses be recruited, especially when the Government appear to be ramping up the hostile environment rhetoric and making the UK as unattractive a place as possible to come and work? The loss of many NHS workers from the EU is a tragedy.

Bedford Hospital had to recruit 237 nurses from Australia, India and elsewhere to fill vacancies left largely by EU nurses who left because of their fears for the future and the ill treatment they received in the UK. It is a testament to the hard work of the hospital's chief executive, Stephen Conroy, that, despite those staffing difficulties, the hospital is projected to reach full recruitment of band 5 nurses for the first time in many years, but that will be achieved only by recruiting nurses from overseas.

We also need to increase capacity in clinical placements, to support nursing students at universities. How will the Government achieve that? How many nurses do the Government expect to retain? When will the Government publish their plan in full? Will the Secretary of State report on progress made in this Parliament?

This year, the World Health Organisation is celebrating the first ever year of the nurse and the midwife, at a time when the spotlight is on the nursing profession across the globe. As their elected representatives, we must stand with them and celebrate this diverse and dynamic profession. I will do everything possible to ensure that our health services are staffed safely. It must be a

priority for us all. The problems are well known. The evidence continues to mount. We need decisive action, but we are not getting it from a Government drowning in Brexit uncertainty. Nursing staff need action now, as do their patients. We cannot wait any longer.

9.47 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) on securing this debate. Although this debate is about nursing shortages in England and health is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland, I believe we are experiencing the same problems in Northern Ireland that exist in Wales, Scotland—as mentioned by the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone)—and the whole of the United Kingdom. The solution must be UK-wide.

The Minister has responsibility for England, but I want to refer to things that are happening in Northern Ireland, which I believe the UK Government can change to the benefit of the devolved Administrations. We are currently facing a crisis in nursing care. Although nurses in Northern Ireland have received a pay increase, which they deserve, that does not ease the conditions in which we are asking them to work. Those conditions are the same as in England, Scotland and Wales.

During the election, nursing was perhaps the largest issue I was confronted with on the doorstep, along with the dysfunction of the Northern Ireland Assembly, which, although we are not directly responsible for it, people still wanted to talk to us about. When we got past the misinformation that had been fed to people in a deliberate attempt to skew the vote, it was clear from speaking to nurses that, although the pay issue had been an insult to them, they had genuine concerns about staffing levels—the subject of this debate. The concerns I heard on the doorstep were clear to me, as I am sure they were to all hon. Members from across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. There was a genuine concern that the everyday nurse felt guilty about taking annual leave; they felt that they were letting people down by having their hard-earned time off. That should not be so.

The health service in Northern Ireland has a registered nurse vacancy rate of 11.6%, equating to precisely 2,103 empty posts, as well as a shortage of 421 nursing assistants. The cost of employing nurses via agencies has increased from £10 million in 2012-13 to £32 million in 2017-18. I know that the last few years, with a non-functioning Assembly, were an issue regarding the employment of agency staff.

I had a meeting with the Royal College of Nursing some six weeks ago in my office, and I welcome the fact that the Northern Ireland Assembly is up and running. I also welcome the fact that the Minister who has responsibility for the Health Department in Northern Ireland, Robin Swann, has committed to recruiting more nurses. I understand that 700 nurses will be recruited, which will go a long way to addressing some of the empty posts. However, that will still be only a third of the way to filling all the vacancies that exist; the other two thirds of vacancies also have to be filled.

Jamie Stone: The hon. Member makes an extremely interesting point. At the last election, constituents and voters said to me on the doors that they would prefer

that nurses were employed by the public purse—by the Government—rather than via an agency, which, by definition, makes a profit on the salaries for those nurses. I suggest that the general public does not like that and, if I am reading him correctly, he does not like it either.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and that is exactly what I am saying. I know that the Health Department in Westminster does not have responsibility for recruiting nurses in Northern Ireland. The Minister in Northern Ireland now has, and he has made the first step towards addressing that issue. It is hoped that over the next couple of years the number of vacancies—over 2,100 nursing posts, as well as 400-odd nursing assistant posts, making about 2,500 vacancies in total—will be addressed. We hope that the cost of agency staff and the extra financial burden created by the fact that agencies are profit-making organisations—this is how they make their money—will be addressed in a way that helps to reduce the shortcomings.

This situation means that nurses cannot simply work their 37.5-hour working week. They are called in on days off and asked, “Can you do the twilight shift? Can you give me a couple of hours?” That is not the fault of the ward sisters; they need the floors covered and are under pressure. It is simply that we do not have enough full-time working nurses in the NHS. That means that conscientious nurses, who do not want to leave the ward or the district short, are working additional hours themselves, and not in the short term to save money for a holiday or a renovation of their house. Instead, they are consistently working overtime to help on the wards, and so they are not getting their family time, their social time and—more importantly—their rest time.

I have had glimpses of this situation. Some 6,500 nurses live in my constituency, so I have regular contact with them. I got a brief glimpse of the work of a nurse during my surgery and was in awe of how they stayed on their feet, and remained both sharp and compassionate—as they do. Doing all that with no rest is simply unsustainable. So, for a better system and a better caring system with better nurses, who are more able to work within that system, we need to address the shortage of nurses.

It used to be the case that bank nurses were only used in an emergency, but now they are used ever more frequently and their use is becoming the norm. They are no longer just used in the emergency. Using them is now just the fall-back position: “Let’s just do it”. That is not good either for morale or for finances—the current finances clearly indicate that it is not. It is more costly to have agency staff in than it is to have nurses on full-time pay.

I will give another example, of a nurse who approached me in my office and asked me to clear up rumours about nurses, their employment and so on. She is a young nurse in her early 20s who has been working at the Ulster Hospital in Dundonald—the main hospital in my constituency—but she has been left as a staff nurse in charge at night on numerous occasions. What she said to me was simple; she just said to me, “Jim, keep the pay rise and please give me an extra nurse per shift.” That was her initial reaction, because she can feel the pressures of delivering this system, and was saying, “I physically can’t do it all for much longer”.

[*Jim Shannon*]

This is a lovely young girl who is dedicated and good at her job, but who knows that when she has kids she will not be able to work 60 hours a week. She is asking me to do something about that, and today I am on the path towards doing something; I am highlighting this issue. I am very happy to do so.

Scott Mann: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent point about that young lady. There is one way that the NHS might be able to support her. NHS Property Services owns huge amounts of land around the country on the public estate, and I know that the Government are putting together a key worker policy, for there to be a 30% discount for local people in the housing policy, like a local homes discount. Does he think that if we included nurses within that category that we might be able to address some of the challenges that we face, by giving people discounts and getting them into the profession?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I was not aware of that proposal until now, but it certainly seems like a way of incentivising people—for some people. Let us be honest; it will not suit everybody's circumstances, but it will suit some people's. Whatever we can do to incentivise nurses to stay in the profession is good. I will give a third example, if I may, of the reasons why nurses are not staying in the profession, but some of the things that the hon. Gentleman referred to would be helpful.

I met one woman in her 30s in my office who wanted to go into nursing, but she could not do so because her tax credits would not allow her to stop work while she got her national vocational qualifications and other qualifications. So, reluctantly, she gave up and we lost her. She is not the only one we have lost; we have lost many more than that.

I know that in Northern Ireland this issue is not the responsibility of the Minister who is here today, the Minister for Care, the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately); I understand that. However, will she ask the Minister who has the portfolio for tax credits to review the circumstances around tax credits and the circumstances of those nurses who are trying to get their NVQs, and have to stop work to do so? If we are losing nurses because of an anomaly in the system, let us try to address that anomaly, to allow us to retain the nurses who want to be retained.

My mother was a nurse. That was a long time ago; my mother is coming up to 89 now. I know that for her nursing was a vocation, as it is for many other people. In today's busy life, it is important that we try to help those who want to be in nursing for the rest of their lives to retain their position. However, that was a young girl in her thirties in my office who wanted to go into nursing and unfortunately we lost her.

We lost someone who wanted to train as an intensive care unit nurse, because the current system could not work with her and her four children. Can we do better in helping mature people to come out of retail and enter education, while still having their children cared for? There are many such people across the nation and across my constituency. There are also a great many people who are former nurses, and we should try to

recruit them back into the system as well. There comes a time in their life, perhaps when their children are a bit older and they find themselves with a bit more time on their hands, so what are we doing to attract the more mature nurse into the profession that they once wished they were in?

There must be a way of doing that. I believe that it is up to us in this House to address these two issues, which are so closely linked: getting more nurses; and making a clear way forward to allow mature people to choose nursing, not simply as their job but as their vocation and their calling.

9.58 am

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) on securing this excellent and timely debate.

I speak today as the newly elected chair of the all-party parliamentary group on cancer. Currently, there are 3 million people in the UK living with cancer, and that number is set to rise to 4 million by 2030. In a survey conducted by Macmillan Cancer Support, more than two thirds of cancer patients said that they are not getting the support they need from the NHS in England, and that is because the NHS is buckling under increased workforce pressure.

The healthcare system is facing a staffing crisis that is crippling frontline services and affecting the care that patients receive. There are more than 40,000 nursing vacancies in the NHS workforce, and Government figures show that waiting times for cancer treatment and diagnosis are at record high levels.

Every day across England, NHS professionals work tirelessly to give people living with cancer as full a life as they can. They are stretching themselves and working harder every day to meet rising demand, but the harsh truth is that there simply are not enough professionals with the right skills to meet the needs of the growing cancer population. That is why I support Macmillan's "Save our support" campaign. I was delighted to attend its parliamentary reception in January, along with nearly 140 parliamentarians who came to speak to frontline healthcare professionals and people with lived experience of cancer.

The NHS played a key role in the general election debate. Although the pledges on nursing numbers in the Tory party manifesto were welcome, it is imperative that we see the full NHS people plan for England published so that we can see how the Government intend to deliver on their commitment to grow and support the NHS workforce. Overall, we need a Government that get their numbers right and deliver on their promises.

I have concerns that the interim NHS people plan published last year contained no specific actions for cancer services. Without a clear plan for cancer, the NHS will not be able to cope with the demand caused by the rising numbers of people living with it. There are concerns that the NHS people plan will not be as ambitious and will not have the committed funding made available to ensure that it delivers for the 4 million people likely to be living with cancer by 2030.

According to a recent *Health Service Journal*, 20 of the UK's largest cancer charities recently wrote to the Secretary of State to raise their strong concerns that the NHS people plan falls far short of what is needed to

support the welcome ambitions within the NHS long-term plan on cancer survival and care across England. Will the Minister please confirm when the NHS people plan will be published, and will she provide assurances that the Government will provide the necessary funding and resources to ensure that it can meet its ambitious targets on cancer?

The Government's target to have an additional 50,000 nurses in the NHS relies heavily on increasing staff retention. Macmillan Cancer Support published a report last year, "Voices from the frontline", which underlines the important role that continuing professional development can play in supporting and retaining staff. The report reflects the views of lead cancer nurses from across England, focusing on the challenges that they and specialist cancer nurses face in accessing CPD opportunities and the impact of that on cancer care. Some 44% of lead nurses felt that their workload negatively affects the quality of care that they can give to cancer patients; 39% said that their current workload is unmanageable; and 44% say that the strain negatively affects their morale.

Macmillan professionals said that they had faced three main barriers to accessing CPD: a lack of protected time, funding, and locally available courses. Only a third of the specialist cancer nurses surveyed had protected study time to access and attend CPD training. A quarter of survey respondents reported that the availability of CPD training has worsened over the past two years.

Cancer clinical nurse specialists report that CPD is essential to the delivery of high-quality personalised care for people living with cancer. More than three quarters of respondents to the Macmillan survey were clear that having more time for CPD would help them improve care for people living with cancer. To address that, the Government should immediately return the CPD budget to at least £205 million, the level it peaked at in 2015-16 before budgets were cut, and not by 2024, which is the Government's current plan. To ensure that the NHS has the well-trained and motivated cancer workforce it needs, will the Minister therefore please provide reassurances that the Government will return the CPD budget to at least £205 million to support the NHS people plan?

It would be remiss of me to stand here as a Welsh MP and not mention that the budget challenges we have spoken about are, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has highlighted, pan-UK issues. I understand how health services are devolved and that the challenges are ones we deal with every day, but we are losing experienced nurses quicker than we recruit them. We are on the edge of a full-blown crisis. I am very happy to stand here and say that the Welsh Government have an ambitious NHS workforce plan to train and recruit, and they have kept the nursing bursary. We need a positive action plan that will move quickly. In Wales we are moving quicker than the UK Government, so what are the UK Government doing?

As a former teacher I know what it is like to inspire young people to go into the teaching or nursing profession. What are the Government's commitments? We need to work with our young people. Once they start on their journey into a profession, we need to highlight the benefits of working in the healthcare system. It could be a 12-year journey to become a senior nurse. By that time it is a little too late, because we have not trained

them up in time to deal with the current crisis. What are the UK Government's plans to recruit from overseas? We need to deal with that.

Lastly, it is important to dispel the myth around the funding that has been made available to the NHS in England. The NHS Funding Bill, which recently passed through both Houses, does not represent new money. It was first announced by the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) in June 2018 and does not cover the budgets for Health Education England, which include education and training for the extra nurses that the NHS in England desperately needs.

As part of the Budget next week and the comprehensive spending review later this year, it is crucial that the Chancellor supports people living with cancer across the country and ensures that the NHS people plan and Health Education England get the funding that they need to deliver the ambitious cancer care targets in the NHS people plan.

10.6 am

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) for securing this debate today, and also grateful for his summary of the issue. He is correct to say that the growth in nursing numbers is nowhere near enough. I agree with him on the importance of investing in the NHS and the nursing workforce.

I am also grateful for the work of the Royal College of Nursing in highlighting the issue, including the recent petition with more than 200,000 signatures that was presented to the Prime Minister in February and called for action to remedy the staffing shortages as a priority. We know that there are some 40,000 nursing vacancies in England, and one in three nurses are due to retire within the next 10 years. In Scotland, of course, this issue is devolved, and in normal circumstances I would not interfere in a debate focused on the issue in England. However, devolved Administrations do not operate in a policy vacuum. UK policies, such as those on Brexit and immigration, affect all parts of the UK, so I will contribute to the debate today. Nor do I feel alone in this matter as several of my Celtic cousins have already spoken in the debate, and the issue benefits from hearing about what happens in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland.

NHS Improvement reported in September last year that the latest nursing vacancy rate in England stood at 12.1%. Information Services Division statistics show that NHS Scotland's nursing and midwifery staff vacancy rate was 6% in the same month. Qualified NHS nursing levels per head are already 46% higher in Scotland than in England. For nursing levels in England to match Scotland's, they would need to increase nursing numbers by more than 130,000. That puts the 50,000 nurses that were promised for England into a certain context. Consequently, there may be lessons we can learn from how each of the four national health services operate, and I hope my observations on the differences between the two countries' nursing numbers are seen as constructive and helpful.

NHS staffing per head is 26 staff per 1,000 people in Scotland, whereas England's is 19.7. Those figures are from September and August last year—I could not get

[*Martyn Day*]

the months to match, but it sets the pattern. There are more qualified nurses and midwives per 1,000 of the population, with 8.1 whole time equivalents in Scotland versus 5.5 in England. Why is that? The number of people in Scotland choosing a career in nursing is increasing, and bursaries are undoubtedly one reason for that. Bursaries for student nurses in England were scrapped as part of the Tories' austerity measures, a policy that led to a drop of more than 30% in nursing applications. In stark contrast, those bursaries were protected and increased in Scotland by the SNP Scottish Government, and nursing student numbers in Scotland have increased for seven years in a row. One of the big differences is that in Scotland, nurses will receive a bursary of £10,000 a year from next September, and already benefit from free tuition. The UK Government pledged a £5,000 annual grant for student nurses from this year—only half of what we are offering in Scotland—and still expect nursing students who train on the job to pay thousands in tuition fees. I believe that figure in England is around £27,750, a stark contrast to the figure in Scotland, which is zero.

Nurses in Scotland across all bands are better paid than elsewhere in the UK, which also helps to make nursing a career choice and benefits retention. Training more nurses is key to addressing this issue. The latest UCAS figures show a 2% increase in people from Scotland choosing nursing as a career, but a decrease of 4% in the English figures. Meanwhile, a report last year by the Nuffield Trust, the Health Foundation and The King's Fund concluded that the NHS in England has no chance of training enough GPs and nurses to solve the shortages it faces. This suggests that in order to address the current and future shortages, we need to look elsewhere.

That leads me on to the topic of immigration. EU nationals make up 10% of the medical workforce, and we should be concerned about the insight into their mindset provided by the 2018 British Medical Association survey of 1,527 EEA-trained doctors across the UK, which found that 35% were considering moving abroad. Of course, only time will tell what actually comes to pass. However, immigration to the UK has fallen to its lowest level in six years according to the Office for National Statistics, and Cambridge Econometrics' analysis states that leaving the single market will see the working-age population fall by nearly 2% by 2030, which is equivalent to 790,000 people.

The challenges with recruitment are not going to get any easier. On 15 November, the King's Fund, the Health Foundation and the Nuffield Trust predicted that NHS England staff shortages will rise to over one in six health service posts by 2030. Clearly, we must attract skilled workers from abroad, but the UK Government's regressive immigration plans look set to make the situation worse. At this time, details of a UK NHS fast-track visa scheme remain unclear, and I look forward to hearing those details; perhaps the Minister will enlighten us. With regard to the proposed points-based immigration system, I assume that nursing will be classed as a shortage occupation, which would require a £20,480 minimum salary. I believe it must be on the shortage occupation list, but also that it should be exempt from

any salary threshold. The Library briefing for today's debate gives us the RCN's opinion of the points-based system:

"We are concerned that these proposals from the Government will not meet the health and care needs of the population. They close the door to lower-paid healthcare support workers and care assistants from overseas, who currently fill significant numbers of posts in the health and care workforce."

I also echo their calls for the introduction of an immigration system that supports nursing, and to exempt nursing staff from the immigration health surcharge, which seems an unnecessary burden to put on people coming here to relieve our own health crisis.

I will finish with a quote from the RCN's general secretary, Dame Donna Kinnair, who has said that there are

"43,000 vacancies in the NHS in England alone. Yet failure to increase nurse numbers isn't inevitable, but a political choice. We need proper financial help for nursing students in every nation of the UK in order to ensure the supply of nurses in the future, and clear legal duties for governments and NHS leaders across the UK to ensure there are enough nurses to provide safe care to patients."

It is indeed a choice, and I hope that my Scottish comparisons and views on immigration help to inform the choices facing NHS England.

10.13 am

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) on having secured this important debate, and on the thoughtful and knowledgeable speech he has given about the challenges currently facing the nursing workforce. He made some very interesting points: the reference to nurses being there at our birth, at our death and throughout our lives was an important and moving reference to how much we all rely on nurses. He mentioned the 10.7% nursing vacancy rate in his region, which is a staggering statistic; there are actually some variations within that, because the vacancy rate for mental health is even higher, at 15.3%. Those huge variations across disciplines need to be addressed by the Government.

My hon. Friend also referred to the RCN's survey of its members, in which a staggering 95% of nurses said that patient dignity is compromised and 92% felt worried that patients may be receiving unsafe care. That should be a red-light warning for us all about what is going on in our NHS. What he said about the professional attitude and sense of duty that nurses feel was particularly important: when a nurse is at the end of their shift but sees something that needs to be done, they carry on. They are professional, but they carry the impact of that with them, and we have been relying on their good will to keep the NHS going for far too long. Finally, my hon. Friend referred to this being the year of the nurse and the midwife, and was absolutely right to say that we should celebrate this diverse and dynamic profession.

We heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), as we often do in these debates, who gave his own perspective from Northern Ireland. He referred to the recent dispute there, and it was clear from what he said that the concern was as much about working practices as it was about pay. He was right to say that workforce challenges there are often mirrored here. The

hon. Gentleman also referred to a worrying increase in the agency bill in Northern Ireland, which may well be partly related to the greater flexibility that agency work can sometimes provide to nurses. That is something we need to reflect on when we consider working practices.

As always, it was a pleasure to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), who I congratulate on her appointment as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on cancer. She was right to highlight patients' concerns that they are not getting the care they need, the reason for which is inextricably linked with the staffing shortfall. She was also right that it is vital that the full people plan be published as soon as possible, and to raise the concern that the plan will not include the funding it needs to meet our ambitions. Only last month, the Government introduced the NHS Funding Bill 2019-21, so we already have the parameters for funding the healthcare system over the next three to four years. Really, it should have been the other way around; we should have established what the staffing need was before we put a financial envelope around it.

My hon. Friend also referred to the excellent Macmillan report, "Voices from the frontline", and the concerns it expresses about the lack of ability to access continuing professional development. She highlighted the impact on retention caused by cuts to the CPD budget, and the report's references to many nurses feeling that their current workloads are unmanageable. My hon. Friend has said that we are on the edge of a full-blown crisis; I could not agree more.

I pay tribute to the 1.9 million or so dedicated and hard-working people who work across both the health and the social care sectors; it is always an honour to speak up on their behalf. Our NHS is built on its staff, and in particular our nurses and midwives who, as we have heard, go the extra mile day in and day out, despite too often finding themselves under intolerable levels of pressure. It is a damning indictment of this Government's record that despite this being the 37th debate in this place over the past three years on workforce shortages in health and care settings, there is still no plan to address this crisis. It is not over-dramatising matters to describe it as an existential crisis, because following nearly a decade of mismanagement and underfunding, we are facing a very real recruitment and retention crisis in the NHS. Years of pay restraint, cuts to training budgets and growing pressures have left us with a chronic shortage of over 100,000 staff.

Those shortages affect patient care every single day. They manifest themselves in the NHS performance data, which month after month show hospitals with the worst performance data on record. That will not change unless the workforce shortages are acknowledged and addressed. The proportion of people being seen within four hours in A&Es is the lowest on record, and the number of people waiting four hours or more on hospital trolleys is the highest on record, as is the number of people waiting 12 hours to be admitted and the total number of people on the waiting list in England. Targets for patients to receive treatment within 18 weeks have not been met for four years now, and there is no sign that that situation will improve any time soon.

The Government need to take seriously the growing gap between the number of nursing staff and the number of people who need healthcare. As we know, the Royal College of Nursing estimates that there are about 43,000 nursing

vacancies in the NHS in England alone and warns that the nursing shortfall will rise to almost 48,000 by 2023 and a mind-boggling 108,000 by the end of the decade. That is a staggering figure. To put that in context, it is more than every man, woman and child living in the Minister's constituency—picture that. That is how much of a shortfall we could face by the end of the decade, if action is not taken.

The effect of staffing shortfalls on patients must never be underestimated, but they also have an effect on staff. NHS staff are consistently asked to take on additional responsibilities, to work harder, to do more intense shifts and to take on excessive numbers of patients. All the surveys show the effect that that has on them. It is worrying, but not surprising, that only a quarter of respondents to the NHS staff survey published last month agreed that there were enough staff for them to do their job, and that more than two thirds per week worked additional unpaid overtime. As we heard, higher numbers of emergency care nurses—more than nine in 10—are worried that patient dignity is being compromised and that patients may be receiving unsafe care.

I am sure that all hon. Members were moved by the testimony that my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford quoted. No one, patient or staff, should be in that situation. The testimony used the word "dignity" repeatedly, which should cause us to reflect on the situation that we are putting people in. I am sure that we would not want that for our family.

Staff are working in a high-pressure environment without adequate resources or support, which not only puts patients at risk but damages the mental health of staff and leads to low morale, poor wellbeing and a poor work-life balance. It is no surprise that conditions are becoming intolerable for some staff. More than 40% of NHS staff were unwell as a result of work-related stress in the last year—that is an unsustainable figure.

An analysis of NHS Digital data finds that more than 200,000 nurses have left the NHS since 2010-11; there has been a 55% increase in voluntary resignations from the NHS with staff citing a poor work-life balance as the primary reason; and the number of voluntary resignations for health reasons has increased threefold in the past 10 years. It is no wonder that the recent "Interim NHS People Plan" states that hard-pressed staff are "overstretched" and admits that people no longer want to work in the NHS. It is our pride and joy. People should positively want to go to work every day full of joy about what they are delivering for the people of this country, but the pressure is becoming too great.

It is damning that we still have no funded workforce plan, despite the Government's promise of one when the funding settlement was first announced in summer 2018. We also still have no framework that sets out the roles, responsibilities and accountabilities for workforce supply and planning.

As has been mentioned, last month's NHS Funding Bill was an opportunity for the Government to show their commitment and set out plans for a proper costed strategy for the workforce but, frankly, it was a publicity stunt. Despite every trust chief executive reporting that understaffing is their biggest challenge and a hindrance to delivering safe care, there was nothing in the Bill on protecting and enhancing training budgets. I acknowledge that staffing shortages are the responsibility of multiple decision-makers across all levels of the health and social

[Justin Madders]

care system, but ultimately, they are outside the control of frontline staff and trusts. The Government need to act to ensure that there are enough skilled staff to ensure safe and effective care.

The standards of protection and safety that are rightly expected by staff and enshrined in the NHS constitution appear to have been abandoned by the Government. Things have become so bad that NHS England has recommended that the Government review

“whether national responsibilities and duties in relation to workforce functions are sufficiently clear.”

The public are concerned and want action too. In a recent YouGov poll, 80% of respondents in England agreed that

“the Government should have a legal responsibility to ensure there are enough nursing staff to meet the country’s needs”.

The Royal College of Nursing, other royal colleges and health organisations are all calling on the Government to take action to ensure clear workforce accountability in law. Unfortunately, there has been a continued failure of leadership to bring forward the required legislation to guarantee and enshrine safe staffing levels in the NHS in England. That has left us lagging behind Scotland and Wales, which have already established explicit accountability for workforce provision.

It is vital that, as the royal colleges are calling for, an NHS long-term plan Bill for England sets out a framework of explicit roles, responsibilities and accountabilities for workforce supply and planning, through all levels of decision-making. Like other hon. Members, I am keen to see the detail of the Bill and whether it will contain the long-awaited commitment to safe staffing, in addition to a bold and fully funded workforce strategy. I welcome the Minister to her place; perhaps she will indicate when that Bill might be introduced when she responds.

The election promise of 50,000 more nurses in five years is all well and good, but without a plan for how that will be delivered and maintained in the long term it is pie in the sky. As it is British Pie Week, I cannot think of a more apposite metaphor. We all know that that figure does not stand up to even the most cursory inspection. It is not 50,000 extra nurses, but the retention of 19,000 existing nurses and the recruitment of an additional 31,000. As has already been clearly set out, retention is a huge challenge that the Government are failing on.

The Minister will no doubt tell us there has been an increase in the number of nursing staff in the last year. Of course, in such desperate times, any increase is welcome, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford said, it is a miniscule 0.4%. Let us be honest: the scale and pace of the increase is not happening fast enough. There are also concerns that the figures do not reflect what is really happening on the ground, because they were taken at the optimum time to capture the new registrations before the impact of annual departures is felt.

The Government’s failure to train enough nurses will not be reversed by the recent announcement of maintenance grants for nursing students, as the grants will cover only living costs, not tuition fees. Many student nurses are

slightly older and may have family responsibilities, yet the sum on offer from the Government to support them through their training is slightly less than £100 a week.

Evidence shows that, since the Government scrapped the bursary scheme in 2016, applications to study nursing have dropped by 25% in England. As we and many others repeatedly warned at the time, that was bound to happen. Adequate funding for nursing students is crucial to attract more people to study nursing. I hope, again, that the Government listen to us when we say that the U-turn is only partial and not enough to undo the damage done. It is still the case that the prospect of accruing large debts is a huge disincentive for those who want to train in nursing, especially prospective mature students who may already shoulder debt from a previous degree in another subject.

With Labour’s analysis showing that the first cohort of students who started their nursing degrees in 2017 will graduate with £1 billion in tuition fee debt, everything possible must be done to remove the financial burden for prospective students. If the Government are serious about recruiting more nurses, they need to match our commitment to bring back the nursing bursary in full, including the abolition of tuition fees.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford that the new maintenance grants must be increased to cover actual living costs. Given that the Government have admitted the error of their ways in removing the bursary in 2016, I hope that the Minister will set out whether any maintenance loan debt incurred by students between 2017 and 2019 will be written off.

I cannot end without mentioning immigration. The NHS plans to increase the international recruitment of nurses to reduce workforce pressures, but, at the same time, the Government are planning to raise the health surcharge that those staff have to pay. Unison and the RCN are calling for nursing staff to be exempt from the immigration health surcharge. Those staff already make their contribution to the NHS by working in it. Alongside their colleagues, they often go beyond their contractual hours to keep the service from crumbling under the pressure. It is indefensible to continue to apply the surcharge to them.

The RCN also calls for nursing to remain on the shortage occupation list and for nurses to be exempt from the salary threshold when the points-based immigration system comes into force. Given the challenges outlined today, could the Minister set out when responding what representations she has made to the Home Office about bolstering the workforce and ending the uncertainty and red tape in international recruitment? Nursing is a global recruitment market, and a challenging one at that. If the Government’s workforce strategy is over-reliant on international recruitment, it will fail, particularly when barriers are put in the way of recruitment. The myriad of reasons that have been set out about failing to improve retention rates will not lead us to a better place.

10.29 am

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) on securing this debate. I thank him for his tone and his constructive approach to the challenges. I also thank him for giving me this opportunity to speak about a subject that I am truly delighted to have as my responsibility

as a new Minister in the Department of Health and Social Care, and about which I feel very strongly—namely, the NHS workforce.

Our NHS is truly fantastic and we as a nation are proud of it. However, as we know, the NHS is really its people. The people of the NHS are the NHS—from the most senior doctor, to the newest healthcare assistant and everything in between. That is particularly true of nurses, who make up nearly one quarter of the NHS workforce, and good healthcare depends absolutely on good nurses.

The NHS should be looking after its nurses, but over many years visiting hospitals and community services—this goes back a long time—I have had too many conversations with nurses who feel that the NHS, or their employer, has not been looking after them. The biggest problem that comes up, going back over many years, is that of staff shortages.

I completely agree with the hon. Member for Bedford that the vacancy rates among NHS nursing teams are too high. They are particularly high for some specialties, such as mental health. There are variations across regions. For instance, in the north-east, Yorkshire and the north-west, the highest vacancies are in ambulance trusts. We also know that there are particular challenges in rural areas, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), and across the nations of the UK. As we heard from the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), there are challenges in rural parts of Scotland. We heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about the challenges in Northern Ireland, and there are also parts of Wales that are struggling. This is not just a problem in England, but nevertheless I recognise the problem in England. We need plans to address that, and we have plans, which I will come to.

The hon. Member for Bedford also flagged up the importance of safe staffing in the NHS. I absolutely agree that our first priority must be that the NHS is a safe place for patients, and that care is safe. As he will know, trusts call on bank and agency staff, to make sure that they have enough staff to make wards safe. We must appreciate the work of those staff, who do a really important job of stepping in, but, as I have heard from many a ward sister, although they welcome having agency staff to fill the gaps, that is not the same as having a fully staffed team. That is what we really want in the health service. It will make the NHS a great place to work and enable it to provide the best possible care for patients. That is why the Government have committed to 50,000 more nurses, so that staff shortages and those high vacancy rates will be a thing of the past.

Before I talk about how we will find thousands of new nurses, I want to discuss the most fundamental thing we have to do to succeed, which is to keep the nurses that we already have in the NHS. Some hospitals and teams do not have a problem with staff retention, and some have very low attrition rates. In others, we know that staff turnover is a real problem. There is no point in the NHS training up lots of new nurses if we cannot hang on to those who have already been trained.

In order to retain nurses, we need to make sure that each day is a good day. We need to look out for each and every nurse, which is the day-to-day job of the trusts that employ nurses. I want those trusts that are

struggling with high attrition rates to adopt more of the good practices of successful trusts. The Government are also going to help.

First, as we have discussed today and as we have heard directly from nurses, more investment in ongoing training and continuous professional development would make a big difference. That is why the Government have committed to giving every NHS nurse a £1,000 training budget on top of the training that employers usually provide. That extra funding should help nurses to advance their careers, to move more easily between different roles and, of course, to provide better care to patients.

Secondly, there will be a new offer for all NHS staff. It will be released alongside the NHS people plan, which will set out the support each and every NHS staff member can expect from their employer, including for professional development and for more choice and control over shifts and working patterns. As several hon. Members have said, NHS staff want more control and flexibility. The hon. Member for Strangford mentioned the importance of flexibility. Nurses may have other caring responsibilities. Some trusts are doing well in this area, others not so well. We want all employers to do what they can to give staff more flexibility and control over their working hours.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive response. I know that tax credits, NVQs and time out are not her responsibility, but would she be willing to speak to the Minister with that portfolio to see whether there is any flexibility in the system to enable nurses, especially those with young children, to continue?

Helen Whately: My understanding is that the system in Northern Ireland is different from that in England, so I do not have the answer at my fingertips. I am, however, happy to take up the hon. Gentleman's question and get back him.

Thirdly, on improving the retention of staff in the NHS, we need to tackle the level of bullying and harassment. The recent NHS staff survey had some really positive results on how NHS staff feel about their work. The Secretary of State and I, however, are greatly concerned about ongoing reports of bullying and harassment that staff experience at the hands of other staff, patients and, sometimes, their families. That is simply not acceptable. We must send out a message, loud and clear, that we will not tolerate the bullying and harassment of staff, whether from other staff or from patients and their families. As a society, we should all be grateful to our NHS staff. Hand in hand with that, we absolutely will not tolerate racism, which is an ongoing problem in some parts of the NHS.

Fourthly, pay has never been the top thing brought up by nurses when I have spoken to them about their concerns, but clearly it is part of the picture. By April this year, we will have increased by 12% the starting salary for new nurses compared with three years ago. More than 200,000 nurses are benefiting from pay rises under the "Agenda for Change" pay deal. Nurses below the top of their pay band have been receiving increases of at least 9%, and those already at the top of their pay band are receiving a pay rise of 6.5% over the course of the "Agenda for Change" pay deal.

I just want to pick up on the point about returning to nursing. The issue of retention also applies to nurses who have, for many reasons, taken time out of nursing.

[*Helen Whately*]

We are very keen that more of those nurses return to work. We are supporting nurses who want to bring back their valuable experience to the NHS. I also want trusts to develop posts that will make the most of those nurses' experience and to ensure that there is enough flexibility in their shift patterns and ways of working to fit any caring responsibilities they may have.

Jim Shannon: For that to happen and for them to return, there would need to be a database of all former nurses. I am mindful that there will be a statement later about the coronavirus, and a Health Minister has mentioned having a list of people who could come in and help in the event of a pandemic outbreak. If there is such a list, then there must also be a list of former nurses who have left the sector but wish to come back. Is there such a database?

Helen Whately: I am just digesting what the hon. Member said.

Jim Shannon: I talk very fast.

Helen Whately: I have not seen a database. The hon. Member refers to the coronavirus plans, which are very much on my mind as we talk about the immediate and longer-term plans to increase the number of nurses in the NHS. Clearly, we also have the short-term challenge of ensuring that the staff are there, and that work is absolutely in hand. Returners are an important part of it and we need to ensure that we make use of nurses who have already been trained, to boost the NHS workforce. All in all, we want to ensure that the NHS is a great place to work for nurses who return to it and for those working in it right now. The absolute foundation for ensuring that we no longer have nursing shortages is to look after the nurses that we currently have. On that foundation, we can seek to recruit and train new nurses.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I welcome the Minister to her place. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on cancer, I would like to take this opportunity to ask her to come to speak to us about the NHS people plan, if possible.

Helen Whately: I thank the hon. Member for her invitation. As I am new to the job, I am trying to ensure that I speak to as many stakeholders as possible. I would be delighted to talk to APPGs such as the one she chairs, as and when I can.

I turn now to the ambition to increase the number of nurses that we train. The latest UCAS stats show that there have been nearly 36,000 applications to study nursing and midwifery courses at English universities this year, which is about 2,000 more than last year. The new students will benefit from the new £5,000-a-year maintenance grant, an extra £1,000 if they study specialist subjects such as learning disability and mental health nursing—where we have shortages—and a further £1,000 if they study in areas struggling to recruit. There is also further funding available to support childcare costs, and that financial support is in addition to the learning support fund, which provides help with travel costs for placements, childcare and exceptional cases of hardship. That is all in addition to being able to apply for a student

loan. Unlike other courses, students applying to nursing, midwifery and many allied healthcare professional courses as a second degree will also qualify for the maintenance grant and for student loans.

I set out the financial support we are offering because I recognise that, as the hon. Member for Bedford has said, it can be hard to afford to study nursing, particularly for mature students. We really want more nursing students. Last year, 23,630 people accepted a place to study nursing or midwifery in England. This year, I want to see more. As I have said, there has already been an increase in applicants, but it is not too late for anyone who has yet to apply. UCAS is accepting late applications up to 30 June, and from 6 July people can apply for a course through clearing.

My message goes out to anyone watching this debate who thinks that nursing is for them: please, get applying. If someone wants to become a nurse, we want to help them—no matter who they are or what their background is. However, we know that university is not the route for everyone, so there are other ways to become a nurse. For instance, the Government have developed the apprenticeship pathway, so people can go from being a healthcare support worker to being a nursing associate, and then to being a nurse. If they want, they can then move on to postgraduate advanced clinical practice and nursing. At present there are nearly 2,000 nurse degree apprentices. Although nursing associates are doing a really important job in their own right, they can become registered nurses via a shortened nursing degree.

The things I have just set out are all about increasing our home-grown nurse force, which is an absolutely vital step in ensuring that this country has a sustainable nursing workforce. I am fully aware, however, that we will also need to recruit internationally in order to achieve the ambition of 50,000 new nurses. We cannot do that from the home-grown workforce alone. Many of us, including patients and their families, have good reasons to be grateful to nurses who have come from all over the world to work in our NHS. I am grateful to them.

As we look ahead to including international recruitment as a way to boost our nursing workforce, we do so mindful of the ethics of recruiting from elsewhere. We want to ensure that it works not just for us but for the countries that our nurses come from. We are determined to build bridges with health systems across the world, to share NHS expertise and provide staff who come to work in the NHS with a chance to learn from our health system, just as we benefit from their skills.

The hon. Member for Bedford asked how we plan to increase the nursing numbers by 50,000. In essence, the plan is to improve retention, to support returners to the workforce, to boost our home-grown numbers, and to complement that with international recruitment. In response to questions about when we will publish the NHS people plan, that will be done within the next few months. I have also been asked who is responsible for the workforce. I take the responsibility for workforce in my brief very seriously. I feel very strongly that, from day to day, the biggest determinant of the experience of any nurse or member of the NHS workforce is their employer. NHS employers are responsible for their workforce, and I am keen to see every single trust and NHS organisation investing in and supporting and valuing

their staff. As I said at the beginning of my speech, the NHS is only as good as its people. They are great, and we must look after them.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. This has been an important discussion and some good points have been raised. The mere fact that we are having this conversation demonstrates the importance of nurses to us all and to our health system. Some hon. Members talked about a crisis in our NHS and in nursing, but we have to be careful in getting the right balance in the language we use. Yes, we know that it is tough on the frontline, but we also know that nurses and NHS staff more broadly talk about how very rewarding they find their day-to-day work, and about what a wonderful job it is. I have spoken to nurses who tell me that they would never want to do any other job, so it might be helpful to get the right balance.

The hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) says that her experience as a teacher means that she knows how to inspire. I call on her and everyone else to follow that guidance, as we need to ensure that everybody knows that working in the NHS is a great career. The NHS is a great place to work. Let us not talk it down. Let us make sure that we spend time talking it up.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I appreciate the Minister's comments. I would never talk down a profession that we need and depend on so much. The nurses I have come across, whether from throughout the UK or from overseas, have been absolutely wonderful. We are being positive and want to retain people, and this issue is important to us. Does the Minister agree that this is not just about our healthcare, but about our teachers and public services? We also have a commitment to our consultants, who have a lot of issues and are always overworking to ensure that frontline services continue. Their dedication is absolutely brilliant and we appreciate it.

Helen Whately: I thank the hon. Member for her comments. We can absolutely agree how much we value everyone who works in our public services and with the NHS, including consultants, junior doctors, nurses, nursing associates, healthcare assistants and allied healthcare professionals, as well as every single porter, administrator and member of the management team. I am sure that I have left out some individual roles—healthcare scientists, for example—for which I apologise. The whole NHS workforce has my appreciation.

Jim Shannon: The Minister has mentioned the Government's commitment to increasing national health service funding. It is important to state for the record that we acknowledge the good things they have done.

Helen Whately: I thank the hon. Gentleman. As he says, I have spoken not only about how much we value the NHS workforce, but about our commitment to increasing NHS funding. The two go hand in hand.

A few Members have mentioned that the number of vacancies stands at well over 40,000. Although I absolutely recognise that those numbers are still far too high, the latest data shows a steady downward trend over the past year. I state for the record that as of the third quarter of 2019-20, the number of vacancies was under 39,000.

I will finish with one more piece of good news: the increasing number of nurses in the NHS. As of November 2019, the latest workforce data shows that we had 290,474 nurses in the NHS in England, which is an increase of 8,570, or 3%, since November 2018, and an increase of nearly 17,000, or 6%, since 2010. The numbers are going in the right direction. We have a long way to go but I am determined that we should get all the way to the extra 50,000 nurses in the NHS, so that nursing staff shortages will soon be a thing of the past.

10.51 am

Mohammad Yasin: I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in this important debate, and thank the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), and the Minister, for their responses.

To be honest, I am disappointed with the Minister's response. We have heard it many times before. It is time to take solid action. I ask her to read the responses to the digital engagement team's survey, because she will be shocked by people's comments, which should be an eye-opener for the Government. We are in crisis when it comes to nursing vacancies and getting nurses into jobs. The Government need to take action now, before it is too late. We cannot afford any more delays.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the nursing workforce shortage in England.

10.53 am

Sitting suspended.

Hammersmith Bridge

11 am

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered a proposal for Government funding for the repair of Hammersmith Bridge.

It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. As a fellow London MP, you are no doubt aware of the intricacies of crossing the River Thames.

It is also a great pleasure to see the Minister in her place with her new brief, given how helpful she was at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on the many issues I pestered her with there. I look forward to a favourable response today—I am definitely in buttering-up mode, because I am asking for money.

In the short time we have for this debate, I will do a tour d’horizon of the history, the life, the engineering and the strategic importance of Hammersmith bridge. At the end, however, to spoil the denouement, we come down to one fact. We know where we are going with the methodology, the necessary works—complex as they are—and what to do about temporary river crossings, and although with most of those issues, we do not have a final timescale or costing, we know the ballpark figures. What we do not have, to put it crudely, is the money.

We have had £25 million, which has taken us thus far with the works that are necessary to the bridge, but we need a substantial amount more—at least £100 million beyond that. This debate is my pitch, and that of others, so I am grateful that my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) and the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) are present. I think they would agree that if this major strategic river crossing and landmark, an important bridge for London, is to be restored, the co-operation will be required of not only the local authorities, Transport for London and the Greater London Authority, but the Department for Transport.

Baroness Vere is the Minister with direct line of responsibility for the matter, but I am pleased that the Minister present is covering it in the Commons. Since the debate was granted, however, I am grateful that Baroness Vere has agreed to meet me, the hon. Member for Richmond Park and the two borough council leaders most affected on 9 March. I would have loved it if the Minister present had a cheque with her to hand over to me—I would promise to pass it on—but I understand that the discussion is ongoing and may continue at that meeting. Nevertheless, it is useful to set up some of the arguments today, and some of the background, which I will do as briefly as I can.

In four years’ time, we will celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Act of Parliament that granted consent for the first suspension bridge over the River Thames. That bridge was constructed at the cost of £80,000 and opened in 1827. I had a look at the debate on Second Reading, and it was a hotly contended matter. Mr Serjeant Onslow opposed the motion in favour of the bridge. He called the Bill “perfectly uncalled for” and said that:

“There were already two bridges, Kew-bridge and Putney-bridge, within a mile and a half of the site of the intended bridge, which would lead to a part where there were at present hardly any inhabitants.”

That is slightly insulting to the people of Barnes who, no doubt, were busily constructing their community even then.

Sir F. Ommaney spoke in favour of the Bill. He “complained strongly of the insecure state of Putney-bridge. Not long since, a friend of his happened to be riding over that bridge, when the fore-feet of his horse sank into a hole, and both horse and rider were placed in a most perilous situation.” —[*Official Report*, 13 April 1824; Vol. 11, c. 397-98.]

Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose, for anyone who has driven or walked over Hammersmith bridge in the past few years.

The bridge we know now, the famous landmark, is the finest of the Thames bridges, although I am obviously prejudiced. It is the work of Joseph Bazalgette, who is perhaps more famous for constructing the London sewer system on which we all still rely today. This bridge was proposed in the 1870s as a consequence of 12,000 people crowding on to the old bridge to watch the boat race, the belief being that it was in danger of collapse. Again, we may have to restrict numbers later this month for the boat race—little seems to change over time. In 1884, a temporary bridge was put up—we are discussing such issues again—until finally the bridge that we all know and love today was erected, on the piers of the original bridge.

The current bridge opened in 1887, but its piers are still those of the original 1827 bridge. That is relevant today because, had there been a renovation scheme to restore or replace the piers, that might have brought the bridge up to a much heavier standard of weight, allowing many more heavy vehicles to go across it. Again, that would have been a huge additional investment, even beyond the large sums being proposed today—so we will still be using the 1827 piers.

Most of the rest of the superstructure of the bridge needs substantial replacement. One of the reasons is that over the years Hammersmith bridge has three times been the target of IRA bombing, the first time in April 1939. Again looking at *Hansard*, I see that a Mr Childs—Maurice Childs, a hairdresser from Chiswick—found the bomb while walking across the bridge and had the foresight to throw it off. It exploded, causing some damage to the bridge but saving the main structure, for which he was awarded an MBE following the debate in Parliament.

The two more recent examples of bombing were more serious. The 1996 bomb did not detonate—the Semtex did not go off—fortunately, because at the time it was the largest Semtex bomb ever found in Britain and it would have destroyed the bridge had it done so. Four years later, post the Good Friday agreement, the bridge was damaged by a Real IRA bomb planted underneath the Barnes span. That, in part, led to one of the substantial closures of the bridge. Sadly, the post-war history of the bridge has been a succession of closures over time.

Another debate was held on the 1952 closure, when 13,000 vehicles a day were passing over the bridge—that is slightly more than half the current number—and 2,700 pedal cycles, which I add for the benefit of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth, who chairs the all-party group for cycling and walking. In response to the proposed closure, Mr Williams suggested

“half closing the bridge or giving the Royal Engineers some practice in building a Bailey bridge across the river”.—[*Official Report*, 23 June 1952; Vol. 502, c. 1821.]

Again, we are talking in exactly those same terms now—what the degree of closure needs to be and what temporary bridges need to be put in place. So the 1952 closure was significant. Major refurbishments took place in 1973 and again in 1987. In 1997, an 18-month closure of the bridge was for major works. Following that came the substantial restrictions—down to 7.5 tonnes and a limited number of buses—that have gone on until the present day.

The point of rehearsing all that ancient history is that this is not new to those of us familiar with the bridge. Hammersmith bridge is in a different category from many other bridges over the Thames. It is a largely cast-iron and wooden structure. There is no other example—I think it is unique in the world in how it is constructed. That makes it rather like Hammersmith flyover which we had a similar problem with some years ago—a unique structure that required major closures, and £70 million of expenditure—and the bridge, too, will need a radical solution. One good thing coming out of the current closure is that everybody is agreed on a way forward: we have to do sufficient work to give the bridge a long life into the future. A further patch-up job, or even further substantive repair jobs of the type done previously, clearly will not work.

Where are we in the scheme? Thanks to the £25 million that TfL put up when the closure initially happened last April, there has been no impediment to works going forward: the scoping, the planning and feasibility studies defining what is necessary in terms of both the stabilising works and the major works to the bridge. Within a month or two, we will be in a position to let those contracts and to ensure that the work progresses. Although it is taking a substantial amount of time, there is general understanding that it has to be done properly in that way.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate on a matter of utmost importance in my constituency, and I am pleased to have an opportunity to contribute. While we are considering Government funding to repair Hammersmith bridge, I urge the Minister to consider the difficulties that the bridge closure is causing my constituents in Barnes and further afield. Residents are unable to get to their hospital appointments and face much longer journeys to work. Should the Minister come to Barnes, East Sheen and Mortlake, she would see the appalling congestion being caused. Local businesses tell me that they are suffering reduced takings as a result of the bridge closure.

TfL is reporting that something in the region of 9,000 daily journeys have now dispersed as a result of the bridge closure. While we welcome fewer cars on the road, we should consider the economic and social opportunity cost of the journeys that are not being made.

Andy Slaughter: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. One of the ironies is that, while many people are affected by the closure, it is those who need to travel into London from the south, including residents of Barnes and Richmond and those from wider afield—the residents of Brentford and Isleworth, Hammersmith,

Fulham and Battersea—who are caused additional congestion because of the build-up of traffic going over Putney, Wandsworth and Chiswick bridges.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): May I wish you a belated happy birthday, Ms McDonagh? My hon. Friend mentioned the impact on a much wider area than merely Hammersmith borough and Richmond borough. Parts of Hounslow, particularly Chiswick and Brentford, have suffered major congestion since the closure of Hammersmith bridge to vehicle traffic. The economic impact that the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) described affects a big area. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need to consider the bridge as major infrastructure? I hope they will work with all the local authorities affected, and the MPs, to come to a positive solution.

Andy Slaughter: It is no laughing matter for those severely inconvenienced by longer journey times and the changes to their life that have to be made. We take infrastructure such as this for granted; when it breaks down, it causes major problems way beyond the local area or even region.

There are two matters on which there is clear consensus now. The first is whether the bridge should reopen at least to its previous capacity. I totally understand that cycling and other groups suggest that this could be an opportunity to permanently close the bridge to motor traffic. Analysis by TfL shows that cost-benefit ratio of reopening is 5.8:1, which is very high. Essentially, to relieve the congestion on other river crossings and to make that part of London function again—as much as it ever does in terms of traffic movement—it is a bit of a no-brainer. It is regrettable since we want to promote cycling and walking, and I hope we can hang on to the huge increase in those forms of travel over the bridge. We particularly need bus traffic to be restored, because the bridge is a major bus route, with 24,000 people a day crossing it by bus, as well as more than 20,000 private vehicles.

The second point is the issue of how to go about the works. There is consensus on the need for a temporary bridge for cycling and walking—the previous Minister made that clear in a letter to the hon. Member for Richmond Park. There were moves to have a temporary motor bridge, but for many reasons that I will not go into—cost, feasibility, disruption and destruction of private property—that would not be possible. We need a temporary foot and cycling bridge; although it will cost a substantial amount of money, it will come out of the TfL money already allocated and will allow the major works to go on unimpeded and more safely on the main bridge. I think that is decided. I believe a brief was sent by TfL to the Ministry in preparation for this debate and for the meeting with Baroness Vere, which sets out clearly what the methodology will be.

The separate closure of the bridge last year was a matter of safety, when hairline microfractures were discovered in the cast-iron casing around the pedestals that hold the suspension chains. Sadly, that having happened, a major structural survey at the time showed that the corrosion to the suspension mechanisms, the bearings, the decking and so forth means that substantial parts of the bridge will have to be replaced. It will end up like the broom that has had its head replaced three times and its handle four times, but I am sure it will look magnificent when it is finished and reopened.

[*Andy Slaughter*]

I will finish speaking soon to allow the Minister to reply. We have allocated, if not spent, the £25 million that has come from TfL. It is not in a position to add to that. I will not go through the argument about the subsidy that has been withdrawn or the restrictions on using its capital on assets it does not own. TfL has stepped up to the plate; its expertise and, frankly, its money, has been very useful to get us this far and to ensure that time is not wasted and works delayed.

Equally, Hammersmith and Fulham council has reacted responsibly, as has the London Borough of Richmond. I pay tribute to Stephen Cowan and Gareth Roberts, the leaders of those two boroughs, who have worked co-operatively together in the interests of their populations and residents. As a borough, Hammersmith, notwithstanding other restrictions on its budget over the last few years, is not in a position to come up with money. Those are not controversial statements to make.

We have to look to Government when major strategic assets fail. That is the case in most of the rest of the country. The large local majors scheme, which is available and which TfL's bid addresses, is in funds and is available for this type of work in other parts of the country. The proposition is that, if the Department for Transport accepts that the bridge is part of the strategic road network, it has to reopen to at least its previous capacity to cover single-decker electric buses, as well as similar weights of general vehicle traffic as previously. That will cost a substantial amount of money—at least £120 million on current estimates, and the final estimates will come in a few weeks' time. Crucially, very soon within the next couple of months, work will stop. Even if there is still some money in the kitty, one cannot go on engaging contractors if the money is not there to pay them to do the stabilisation and major works over the next couple of years. That is what we are looking to the Department to fund.

I hope I get some encouraging noises from the Minister, even if she has not brought the cheque with her. Locally, there is a lot of co-operation between politicians of all stripes, because we see the absolute necessity of this work; as I said, it is a bit of a no-brainer. We must get the bridge reopened as quickly as possible and restore it at least to its former weight-bearing ability. I look to the Minister at least to give us some encouragement, and I hope that we can progress discussions quickly over the next few weeks so we can get on with the project.

11.20 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Kelly Tolhurst): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I, too, wish you a belated happy birthday.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on securing this debate on an important issue for London and its residents. Hammersmith bridge is a key Thames crossing. The Government recognise its vital importance to the residents of London and the concern about the additional congestion caused by its closure. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his constructive tone and the way he tends to engage on all these issues.

I totally understand the strength of feeling about this issue. Picking up on the interventions by the hon. Members for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) and for

Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), I understand completely the challenges when a bridge closure affects a Member's constituency. I represent a constituency that straddles a river, so I understand the challenges for residents and for people's ability to get on with their lives when a bridge is taken out of play.

Although I represent Rochester and Strood, I have had the pleasure of passing under Hammersmith bridge, so I am not completely ignorant of its beauty. As the hon. Member for Hammersmith outlined, the bridge was constructed in 1887 and was originally built for horses, carts and penny-farthings. It has done remarkably well considering the volume of traffic it has taken over the years, not to mention the number of terrorist attacks it has suffered. It is not just a beautiful bridge with important heritage considerations, but a marvellous piece of Victorian engineering and the first suspension bridge built over the Thames.

The Government support the efforts to repair Hammersmith bridge and bring it back into operation in a cost-effective and speedy manner. However, we must recognise that it is for the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, as the owner of the bridge, to assess the merits of different funding options for its repair. Local highways authorities such as Hammersmith and Fulham Council have a duty under section 41 of the Highways Act 1980 to maintain the highways network in their area. The 1980 Act does not set out specific standards of maintenance, as it is for each local highways authority to assess which parts of its network are in need of repair, based on its local knowledge and circumstances.

The use of the bridge by people further afield does not change that responsibility. There will of course be instances around the country of highways assets being used by those who are not resident in the area. The Government provide funding for local authorities in England, including London boroughs, to direct towards their local priorities. That is in addition to the funding provided to London boroughs through the local implementation plan process by Transport for London to help implement the Mayor's transport strategy.

Although the bridge is owned by Hammersmith and Fulham, I am pleased that TfL, which has considerable expertise in this area, is working closely with the borough on options for repair. It is further encouraging that TfL has already committed £25 million towards repair works, as the hon. Gentleman outlined. I also welcome the two proposals that TfL, with Hammersmith and Fulham, recently submitted to the Department for a funding contribution towards the repairs needed to the bridge. The Department is considering those proposals in the context of other funding requests and in view of the devolution settlement for London. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the meeting next week with my colleague Baroness Vere, who is the roads Minister, and the deputy mayor for transport. I know Baroness Vere is looking forward very much to working with colleagues on this issue.

London is, of course, one of the most vibrant and dynamic cities in the world. The Government recognise London's important contribution to the UK's economy and culture, and will continue to support its growth and success while delivering on our levelling up agenda. Although London no longer receives a revenue grant from the Government, the Mayor now receives a greater

proportion of business rates income, allowing him to direct that funding towards his priorities. That funding is a significant proportion of TfL's overall income.

The capital's transport system is critical to its ongoing success. That is why we have continued to invest in transformative projects in London, including Crossrail and the Thameslink upgrade. We have also invested through the housing infrastructure fund; London will benefit from around £500 million to fund a number of transport interventions across the capital, to unlock and facilitate the delivery of some of the housing that it desperately needs.

I understand that closures of this kind can be very disruptive to constituents and their representatives, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. I am glad to see Hammersmith and Fulham and TfL working so closely on this issue for the benefit of their residents, and I encourage them to continue that close working relationship. I hope that sustainable transport modes will be considered fully and given the importance they deserve as plans for the repair of the bridge are developed and refined, and that the bridge can be made safe and resilient for the future.

Andy Slaughter: I got a press release today from the RAC Foundation, which states that there are 3,000 sub-standard—that is, not fully weight-bearing—bridges in the UK, so this case is not unique. However, it gives a figure of just over £1 billion for bringing all those bridges up to standard, so clearly Hammersmith is a major project. It is a bigger project than a local authority can sustain. I wonder whether the Minister can give us any comfort about the large local majors scheme and indicate whether it will be available at least to consider a bid by TfL and the boroughs.

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Gentleman is right. Of course, much of the significant infrastructure across the country, including bridges, is very old and may have a chequered maintenance history. It will always be a challenge to ensure that our infrastructure is invested in and maintained in the right way, in order to deliver for all our residents across the country.

As I said, we have received the proposal from TfL for the repair works, and that is being considered. Baroness Vere welcomes the opportunity to work with hon. Members and the council at the meeting I mentioned to try to find a way of bringing Hammersmith bridge—a significant landmark and a piece of engineering that is loved by many—back into use for the benefit of everybody.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Housing and Planning

[SIR CHARLES WALKER *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Colleagues, before I call Mr O'Brien to move the motion, I note that there are a lot of speakers. If you intend to speak, I advise you to be parsimonious with interventions, because it is possible that some speakers will be crowded out.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered housing and planning.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. It is good to see so many colleagues here and I particularly welcome our brilliant new Housing Minister. I will talk about the wider reforms needed in planning and housing, but I want to start with not the where or what of what we build, but some of the problems caused by the way in which the development industry behaves.

The first problem is what has come to be known as fleecing. It has become the norm for bits of new estates, such as car parks and public areas, to be handed over to property management companies for their upkeep, with residents paying for it. Instead of being maintained by the council, the property management company steps in and offers to adopt those responsibilities more cheaply than the council would. Often, however, it makes a cheaper offer only because it is working on the assumption that it will be able to dramatically increase bills.

Several neighbourhoods in my constituency are up in arms about opaque and rapidly rising bills from these property management companies. For example, around Windlass Drive in my constituency, 120 households are charged £60 each to mow around a tiny balancing pond that is much smaller than this Chamber. Absurdly, while the council mows a much bigger area all around it, someone comes down all the way from Derby to mow that last tiny area. That fragmentation increases the costs to householders, and that cost is passed on to people in the form of higher bills. Likewise, residents of Coleridge Way were at one point asked to pay £300 a week for someone to drive over from Solihull to inspect a playground. Four households in Farndon Fields were asked to pay £2,400 for the maintenance of a tiny piece of car park, consisting of no more than 30 minutes' work over five years. That is £2,400 for 30 minutes' work—nice work if you can get it, Sir Charles.

These maintenance companies are opaque, and people who move out often have to pay them substantial fees to get the documentation they need. The Homeowners Rights Network and the National Leasehold Campaign have compiled many such horror stories. We could easily have a debate on fleecing alone. Having found that some companies have in fact broken the law, the Competition and Markets Authority is now taking action. I hope that the Minister will also take action against bad practice that falls below the threshold of criminal behaviour—the industry is full of cowboys—because my constituents are sick of wasting their time battling unfair bills.

[Neil O'Brien]

The second problem with development is that of inappropriate access to sites. Residents who moved into new homes on Farndon Fields were told that there would be no development next to them for decades. That was not true. When a different developer got planning permission to build a new estate right next to them, it got an access route agreed that goes through their estate. It goes through tiny, narrow streets, past a playground and down a tiny cul-de-sac. There is mud all over the roads and huge lorries revving their engines outside people's houses in the early hours of the morning. People on that estate face years of misery. We tried to get the developer to use a different, better access route through a field, but when pressed it said that the farmer was asking for too much money so it was not possible. In the end, the council did not want to be taken to tribunal, so it gave the developer that access route.

I have no idea how much the farmer was asking for, but if the Minister could find a way of creating a better way for councils and developers to secure temporary access routes that avoid disruption to huge numbers of households—it could be a temporary compulsory purchase order or some other solution that provides better access that is not obnoxious to residents—that would be very welcome.

Another big problem in my constituency this winter has, of course, been the flooding caused by inadequate drainage from building sites. Developers typically start work by scraping off the topsoil and only put in the drainage late in the construction process. This year, over winter, many have been caught short, as inadequate, temporary drainage has been overwhelmed by the amount of water. For example, on Kingston Way, developers caused huge flooding on the roads and flooding of people's gardens. They have built a pathetic little muddy sandcastle to try to direct water down the drain. It is a pathetic reflection on an industry that constantly claims to have compassionate constructors. Again, some of that is for local councils to sort out, but if the Minister has an opportunity to change national guidance about the phasing of drainage works on new sites, that would be very welcome.

Another problem with construction practices is about how planning conditions are often violated, with it being difficult for councils to enforce them. Builders work beyond the hours they are permitted to work, lorries park in residential streets and firms fail to honour commitments on wheel washing, so residents end up tramping huge amounts of mud into their new carpets. At the moment, the onus is totally on the council to take developers to court, which is very cumbersome. I encourage the Minister to look at making it much easier for councils to enforce breaches of the rules through some kind of bond system or fixed penalty notice, because developers need to know that if they consistently breach the rules, they will face sure and swift sanctions, and it will cost them money if they break the rules.

The final set of issues with the industry's behaviour relates to adoption. On Devana Way in my constituency, developers sold houses on new, tree-lined streets. It was beautiful, lovely, and people really liked the trees. However, the developer, after selling the houses to people, had a dispute with the council over adoption, which it solved simply by turning up one morning and ripping out all

the trees. Wonderful! I do not see why any developer should be allowed to go ahead with constructing a new estate if it has not already secured agreement on who will maintain it. Developments should not go ahead without clear agreements on adoption and who will maintain what.

Those are some of the things we need to do to change developer behaviour in the industry. I now turn to the bigger picture. We need four or five big changes to the way in which we approach planning and housing policy. First, we need a clearer vision of where we want to build. I believe we must do more of it in our cities, because there are strong environmental and social arguments for that. It means more walking, better public health, less congestion, less pollution and lower energy use. As the Create Streets think-tank has pointed out, having denser cities does not have to mean ugly tower blocks. The densest neighbourhoods in all of Europe are in Barcelona and the densest in Britain are in Kensington, which are nice places to live. Britain currently has the least dense cities in Europe. We also have many cities that have shrunk, with Dundee, Glasgow, Liverpool, Sunderland, Birkenhead, Hull and Newcastle all having smaller populations in 2017 than in 1981.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his speech on this important subject. I very much admire and agree with what he has previously said on urban regeneration. Does he agree that, at its best, urban regeneration provides not only more new supply, but better supply for existing tenants and leaseholders, and that it also helps us avoid disproportionate development in precious green spaces?

Neil O'Brien: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. That is why we must change the objectively assessed need process and choose to build more in our cities. We must support such developments and do all the other things required to support their levelling up.

Secondly, we need a clear vision of what kind of development we want, because while there will always be some developments in the shires and suburban areas, at the moment we mainly have piecemeal infill-type development tacked on to the edge of villages. Developers prefer that, because it is much more profitable as they do not have to pay for the new GP surgery, the new school, the new road and so on. Instead, those developments piggyback on existing facilities. Infill is the type of development that attracts the most opposition. That is not surprising, because it takes place next to existing residents who have chosen to live on the edge of a village or town to get a nice view.

There are physical limits to how much can be added to a place without it losing its character, because roads through the centre of a village become congested and cannot be widened, and the village school cannot be expanded even if the money is available, because it is completely surrounded by houses. In larger strategic developments, which lots of councils now want to move towards, developers do not build next to so many existing residents, the infrastructure can be planned properly and people do not have to live on arterial roads. Let us give councils the tools, the fiscal firepower and the legal ability to have genuinely planned development, not a free-for-all.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on the debate. Does he agree that it would be good for the Government to look again at permission in principle, which means that councils have even less grip on strategic planning control and residents have absolutely no means of complaining, raising objections or having their concerns taken into account?

Neil O'Brien: I certainly agree that it would be desirable to get rid of outline planning permission, which many developers use to get a foot in the door and then have councils over a barrel. However, if we are going to give councils the power to have a proper plan-led system, we need to ensure that we have a better system for development to pay its own way.

Part of the opposition to new housing comes from the fact that too often it comes without the necessary infrastructure. Without new schools or roads, the GP's surgery and everything around the new housing becomes more congested and, of course, people object to that. People see developers making humungous profits while the infrastructure is either not provided at all or the cost is dumped on the taxpayer.

Section 106, the way in which councils currently get developer contributions, is totally dysfunctional. Councils cannot use it to fund recurrent expenditure or anything that meets an existing need in the community. It can only fund a new need that is tied to the new development. Contributions are tied to specific purposes, so if what the community wants changes in five years' time, that is tough luck.

Given that collection is fragmented among lots of authorities—fire, police, health, county and district councils—developers sometimes get away without paying. They can hold off making payments by staying below certain trigger thresholds, and if they are able to hold off for long enough, the opportunity to build a new village hall, for example, is often lost. If a community has only rolled up enough contributions within a specific time period to pay for half a new school, for example, then it gets nothing and the money goes back to the developers. In 2014, the BBC found that councils had returned to developers £1.5 billion that had been intended for the community. When my constituents read that, they are outraged.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on making an excellent speech about these important issues. A number of housing developments that have been built in my constituency over the past few years do not have adequate broadband connections. Does he agree that investment in infrastructure should be extended to include connectivity? Developers and councils should work together to ensure that no new developments can be constructed until adequate broadband connections have been demonstrated.

Neil O'Brien: My hon. Friend is right. Broadband is one of the benefits that people seek from new development. Mandates are one potential way to secure such benefits. The broader change that I would like to be made is the removal of all restrictions that depend on section 106 and for the system to be replaced with something that is more fit for purpose.

Beyond the need to create a better system for contributions, we need to give councils other tools to create better quality and more planned development.

In my constituency, there is an old rubber factory that is two minutes' walk from a mainline station, which is only an hour from London. It is the perfect site to build on, but despite the fact that the council gave planning permission in 2004, nothing has happened because there is nothing to disincentivise the owners from simply sitting on their hands. We need to learn from the USA and from other countries in Europe, and give councils the power to buy land, to grant themselves planning permission and to take more of a leading role in development. The current situation is a legal minefield, so I believe we should reform the Land Compensation Act 1961.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate and for making a fantastic speech. The planning system is so frustrating. Isle of Wight Council does not have a housing revenue account, so it does not have access to the billions of pounds of funding. On the Island we are desperate to build one and two-bedroom properties, rather than being deluged with endless planning applications for low density, greenfield houses for folks to retire to the Island. Does he agree that we need a more flexible system that caters for the needs of specific communities, especially isolated island communities?

Neil O'Brien: My hon. Friend is completely correct. People want a proper plan-led system. Other countries achieve that by allowing local government to play a stronger role in determining where things go.

We must reform the 1961 Act to make it clear that buyers can pay current market use values for land rather than inflated hope values. We should stop land prices being bid up in the first place, by stopping sites going through the plan-making process on the assumption that developers are going to get away without paying for infrastructure. We should turn Homes England into a flying squad to help councils plan and deliver brownfield regeneration. We must make sure that council planning departments are well enough resourced to retain good staff. It is a difficult industry where the poachers, as it were, can pay people a lot of money, and local councils often struggle to hang on to good staff.

My final proposed reform to the planning system is to reboot neighbourhood planning so that it can fulfil its potential. Many places in my constituency have drawn up neighbourhood plans, and people have given a lot of time to them. In some cases they have been a force for good and shaped the way in which, and where, things get built. In other cases, however, they have taken so long to draw up that developers have front-run them. Too many are lengthy and lack the one thing that would give them real bite, which is a map of where development does and does not go.

We should radically simplify and speed up the process of making neighbourhood plans. They should all have a clear map of where development does and does not go. Where councils are planning sensibly, we must give them more legal weight. As I argued in a report for the think-tank Onward, we should reward outstanding councils by making them exempt from any appeal to the planning inspector.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a thoughtful speech. Does he agree that democratic accountability is fundamental to

[Mr Mark Francois]

this process? Is he, like me, concerned about the rumours, which I hope are not true—I am looking at the Minister—that the Government are considering changing planning law so that developers will get automatic planning permission, regardless of the quality of their design, if they make an application in an area zoned for housing? Does he agree that democratically that would be completely unacceptable?

Neil O'Brien: My right hon. Friend makes a thoughtful contribution. It depends what we mean by a plan-led system. It is right that councils should be clear about where development is going, but I worry about anything that would ride roughshod over the wishes of local people, so I agree with my right hon. Friend on that point.

There is much to fix in our planning and housing system. The current rules seem almost perfectly set up to cause a huge amount of grief and political friction, and to deliver a relatively small amount of housing, because they push development in the wrong places, without the necessary infrastructure. If we change the system, we can keep green and pleasant those places we value most, but also ensure that the average family can get a house they can afford. We are fortunate that we have exactly the right Minister to deliver that huge reform.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. I will impose a four-minute limit to start with, but it will probably drop to three minutes.

2.46 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) for securing the debate and for raising a series of important issues about the planning system. I agree with him that the Land Compensation Act 1961 is in urgent need of reform. In fact, I introduced a Private Member's Bill in the last Parliament to exactly that end.

We need to remove hope value from the planning system. Lest any Member is in doubt about why that is important, I give the example of a site in the middle part of Southwark—not in my constituency—that became vacant with an existing use value of £5 million, but was put on the market by the developer with an auction starting value of £25 million. That tells us about some of the gross injustices in our housing and planning system. The system recognises the right of a landowner to a windfall value of £20 million, over and above the right of residents in Southwark to genuinely affordable council homes on the same piece of land.

Reform is important, but cannot be limited to looking at hope value. That is important, but unless we also reform the definition of an affordable home, homes that are not affordable to the vast majority will continue to be built in this country. In my constituency, a definition of affordability recognises homes of up to 80% of market rental value as affordable. They are simply not affordable to the vast majority of my constituents.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): As a fellow MP from London and the south-east, does my hon. Friend agree that the current policy has a disproportionate impact on local communities? There are severe shortages

of professionals in key parts of the public sector and for some private sector employers. We have a huge shortage of NHS staff in Berkshire, as she probably knows. There is also a shortage of people for key commercial businesses.

Helen Hayes: My hon. Friend raises an important point. That is certainly true of some key public services, such as King's College Hospital in my constituency, where staff are moving further and further away from the hospital because they cannot afford to live close to it. It is a widespread issue.

Recently the Government have come forward with mooted proposals to increase the cap on the Help to Buy scheme to £600,000 within its affordable housing programme. It beggars belief that the Government think that that will do anything to address genuine housing need in this country.

I want to highlight one further aspect of the planning system that needs urgent attention: permitted development rights. In the last Parliament, the Government expanded permitted development rights. They did so against all advice from the sector, resulting in examples of the most appalling accommodation being delivered across the country, with office accommodation being converted into homes without full planning permission.

There are a number of things wrong with this system. The first is that in bypassing the planning system, a number of the checks on quality of design and space standards are being bypassed altogether. Section 106 opportunities are also being lost, so those homes are not contributing anything to public or open space or to facilities in the surrounding area.

Those homes being delivered under permitted development rights that are good enough and of a standard would not have had a problem getting through the planning system, so I fail to understand why the Government are continuing to cut the planning system out of this important aspect of housing delivery. We cannot be delivering the slums of tomorrow in order to satisfy spreadsheets today. It simply will not do. It has to stop. I hope the Minister, in responding to the debate, will say some positive things about the need to scrap permitted development rights, rather than expanding them further.

Finally, our planning system has a vital role to play in combating climate change. The relationship between the built environment and climate change is substantial, and unless we fully resource our planning system and enable local authorities to play the fullest possible role in place-making and in driving up standards of insulation and carbon reduction in new development and in new housing, we will not achieve the level of carbon reduction that we need to in order to resolve the climate emergency, and we will still be building homes today that will need to be retrofitted tomorrow. I end with that point, calling on the Government to resource our planning system properly and to recognise the role that it has in facilitating and delivering the high-quality homes we need to build, at scale, in order to resolve both our housing crisis and the climate emergency.

2.51 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) for securing this debate and for its importance, since no one

in this Chamber or elsewhere would deny the need to ensure that we get the right kind of housing for the people who need it most.

While we look at how we get access to affordable housing, I will talk a little bit about how I believe local authorities are as much part of the problem as they are of the solution. I wonder whether the Minister could have a look at the charges that local authorities, including Cornwall Council, are applying to small businesses—small builders and small developers who are trying to solve the problem of ensuring that people have the housing they need.

There are high and, in my view, largely unnecessary charges demanded of small builders as a result of Cornwall Council's policies. I am sure the same is true elsewhere. For example, just to get and complete the form on the Government website regarding section 106, Cornwall Council charges a legal fee of in excess of £1,200. It also demands that over £300 is spent on getting a market valuation to genuinely confirm that a property is affordable.

The community infrastructure levy, introduced by Labour in 2010 but not taken up by Cornwall Council until last year, can add hundreds of pounds per square metre to every house built, just adding to the cost of the affordable home to the person who is trying to get hold of it. The Minister has powers to scrap the community infrastructure levy, and the irony is that Cornwall Council has not yet fully determined how it will spend that money.

That is all in addition to the normal fees that a developer has to secure. Let us bear in mind that in places such as Cornwall, these are often very small builders, who are trying to train good people in the trade and make housing happen. These are additional fees to the fees demanded for planning approval.

Another thing that Cornwall Council has done recently, which on the face of it looks fantastic, is to increase the amount of money that can be charged for a property's remaining empty—again, because the Government have allowed it. It is absolutely the right thing to do, but when someone comes along to purchase a property to bring it back into use, there is no exception made whatsoever, and they continue to pay that fee, additional to council tax, right until the house is lived in.

I have met the council and asked for that to be reviewed. The council says there are no exceptions, but the Minister may want to look at how councils are using the additional charge, which slows down the ability to bring homes back into use and improve their efficiency. It is right that the council apply the charge, but there must be some flexibility when people are trying to do something right by it.

Finally, the Minister may be aware that his Department has recently received guidance from No. 10 about how to ensure that affordable homes can be made available so that people can gain access to them. I have been working with an organisation called Rentplus; the rent-to-buy model is simple and provides homes, often on stalled sites, which my hon. Friend described earlier. The properties are built using pension funds, which we all know are not earning huge amounts of money for those investing in them.

The properties thus come at no cost to the taxpayer or to Homes England, but they provide houses for working families. Those working families get an affordable

rent for as long as they need the home, and then they have the opportunity to buy it at a later point. It is called rent to buy and it is a really good model, but Cornwall Council refuses to allow it to be delivered in Cornwall. The group I am working with, Rentplus, has probably £200 million that it would like to spend in Cornwall. It identifies 800 homes that would have been built if it had been able to do so. Will the Minister look at the guidance that No. 10 has provided, to give Cornwall Council and others encouragement to use models such as rent to buy?

2.55 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Harborough, who made an excellent speech, and I congratulate him on securing this important debate.

Like everybody else, I feel there is a whole range of issues that we could address when it comes to housing and planning, so I will be specific and talk about planning and regulation relating to those homes that are not typically lived in. In my constituency, roughly a minimum of 7,000 properties are not lived in. They are second homes, boltholes owned by people who can afford more than one home. It is not their principal home. That is not even beginning to count the number of holiday lets, which are an important part of the tourism economy in the lakes and the western dales.

We also have a more recent development with the rise of Airbnb. I want to be very clear that Airbnb, like all technology, is neutral; it is what we do with it that gives it moral value for or against. I can think of many advantages of affordable holidays for people, and I can think of advantages for people who have holiday lets on the platform. It is also a way of making good use of space.

There is a lot that is good about Airbnb, but there are some problems as well. Research conducted for *The Guardian* just a few weeks ago showed that one in five houses in the Langdales, in Ambleside and in part of Windermere were on Airbnb. Many of those will be in estates that would not typically house second homes or even holiday lets, so it is clear that there is a movement out of the full-time, affordable family market into homes that are being used simply for rental. That is deeply troubling, and I would like the Government to look at it.

I would also like the Government to understand that although in a free society people should be allowed to use their money however they wish, the excess of second homes in communities such as mine can become deeply problematic. When we think that probably 80% to 90% of homes in certain Lake District villages are not lived in all year round, it is no surprise that beautiful places such as Dent and Langdale—wonderful communities at opposite ends of my constituency, one in the lakes, one in the Yorkshire dales—have school rolls of less than 30. Why? Because the majority of the homes that could send children to those schools are owned by people who do not occupy them or add much in the way of economic value to the community.

So what would I like the Government to do? I would like them to tackle this matter, as they have been promising for many months now. I ask the Minister in particular to address this. The Government have had a consultation,

[Tim Farron]

which closed in January 2019. They have still to act upon it and say whether or not they are going to close the loophole, as the Welsh Assembly have done, that allows some second home owners to game the system and avoid not only paying business rates, but paying council tax altogether. A conservative estimate in my constituency is that second home owners using that loophole are costing local council tax payers in the south lakes at least £3 million a year.

Will the Minister close that loophole, as the Welsh Assembly have? Will he also look at changing planning law, so that having a second home is actually a separate category of planning use from having a first home, so we can regulate the amount of second home ownership in places such as the lakes and the dales? Will he allow councils to look at raising council tax in certain areas, to create a disincentive and allow a redistribution of income in national parks in particular?

Finally, will the Minister look at the Airbnb market, recognising its value and the contribution it makes, but also recognising that a lack of regulation, health and safety applications, insurance and other things may make it an unfair competitor, added to the fact that Airbnb seems to be taking away houses from the affordable market for local families in the lakes? Those issues are a challenge that a Government ought to be addressing.

2.59 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. In the time I have, I will address some broader aspects of housing policy.

The manifesto on which my party fought and won the 1951 general election stated:

“Housing is the first of the social services. It is also one of the keys to increased productivity. Work, family life, health and education are all undermined by overcrowded homes. Therefore a Conservative and Unionist Government will give housing a priority second only to national defence.”

Those are sentiments I completely agree with. I wonder why politicians realised that then, whereas many seem to have forgotten it today. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Minister on his promotion, but the fact that he is the 10th Housing Minister in the past 10 years perhaps offers an interesting perspective on the order of national priorities.

Centre for Policy Studies’ analysis shows that the 2010s saw the fewest new houses built in England since the second world war, but the same could have been said for the 2000s, the 1990s and probably every decade before that for the past half century. The inability of Governments of both political persuasions in the past few decades to address the housing challenge—indeed, crisis—means that the simple laws of supply and demand push house prices even higher. The House of Commons Library suggests that the national average house price hovers around the £250,000 mark.

In a new development in my constituency, the new town of Charlton Hayes, a new three-bedroom end-terrace house now fetches more than £330,000, while a four-bedroom family home costs more than £400,000. This is simply unsustainable. My constituency is by many measures prosperous; unemployment is under 1.5% and weekly earnings substantially outstrip both the regional and

national average. However, in terms of affordability, that house in Charlton Hayes costing a third of a million pounds is 10 times the average annual wage for the area.

What I call the housing crisis relates not only to the private sector but to the overall lack of housing generally, including council housing and social housing; there is a chronic shortage of homes for our people. We must consider the crucial value of social housing, which provides homes for families and for key workers, many on low incomes, who are needed if our communities are to flourish.

It is time that many of us in this House started taking responsibility for the situation that has evolved. Too many hon. Members have allowed themselves to be turned into nimbys. Even in the Minister’s Department, the Minister for Local Government and Homelessness, my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall), my constituency neighbour, does not seem to believe in building homes and has made a virtue of opposing all local development in his constituency. How many hon. Members have churned out election leaflet after election leaflet advocating the need for local homes that local people can afford and then opposed just about every single planning application that has come forward in order to court the support of those fortunate enough to already be on the property ladder?

In the post-war era, Britain faced a similar housing crisis, and a Conservative Government solved it. Macmillan oversaw a housebuilding programme that built 2.8 million homes in the 1950s and 3.6 million in the 1960s. That is the scale on which we have to act today. As the working-class son of immigrants, one of the many reasons I became a Conservative was because of the aspiration that our party promoted and believed in. Our party also understood the pride people took in home ownership and the benefits thereof. John Major, in his first speech to our party conference as Prime Minister in 1991, called it “the power to choose the right to own.”

What are we offering some of our young people today? Some £50,000 of student debt and a room in a shared house if they are lucky.

I have witnessed colleagues rejoice as local housing supply plans for my local council area were consigned to the bin. We were told that the council would now have to come up with a new plan. Do they realise the time that will take and the cost of making those huge applications, and that, within the often several-year timespans involved, political control of the council may have changed, and the whole process may have to start all over again?

3.3 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I will talk about Mostyn House in Parkgate, which was originally a boarding school and is now a listed building. Once the school closed, the site was certainly attractive to developers.

Revised plans to build apartments into the fabric of the old school were submitted halfway through its redevelopment. Despite the many efforts of under-resourced local authority enforcement officers, the developer, PJ Livesey, continually drags its feet, with the result that there is a list of outstanding works as long as your arm.

Planning permission was only finally achieved some five years after residents first moved in. Developers have similarly patchy records elsewhere in the country, but because the system lacks the capacity to challenge these people, they continue to get away with it.

I have long spoken about the industrial scale mis-selling that arose as part of the leasehold scandal, and we finally saw official recognition of that last week from the Competition and Markets Authority. The situation at Mostyn House is slightly different but has many similarities. Little specific legal information was provided at the initial stage, particularly regarding planning and the leasehold position, and little documentation was produced in respect of service charges. What was provided was misleading and inaccurate on ongoing costs. There were also financial incentives to use panel solicitors and pressure to exchange contracts within a tight timescale.

Many people buying these apartments were experienced professionals whose concerns about those issues were assuaged at the time by the developer's sales staff, who confidently stated that the purchase was covered by a Premier Guarantee warranty, which gave the buyers a 10-year guarantee similar to the National House Building Council's. That sounds good, does it not—a Premier Guarantee warranty? It sounds pretty solid, and something to give certainty. Being compared to the NHBC's guarantee gives it an air of respectability.

However, buyers might find that they have more rights if something goes wrong with their kettle. It is at best a dispute resolution service, not a guarantee, and is seriously compromised by virtue of being funded by the developers against whom it is meant to enforce the guarantee. Premier not only provides the warranty on the build of Mostyn House but also acts as the approved inspector in respect of building regulations. Premier is effectively employed as the building control and building regulation compliance body to inspect, approve and guarantee works undertaken by the developer that it is supposed to be insuring against.

After four years of back and forth, Premier's surveyor recently viewed the development and agreed with the defects raised by residents. However, Premier is not prepared to progress the claims, even though water is pouring into apartments right now from the defective roofs, gutters and walls. Premier said:

"The remit of our service is to attempt to bring the two parties together, investigate the dispute and make recommendations... That being said, the conciliation service will not be suitable for all disputes."

That is not a guarantee or warranty; it is a cop-out.

It is clear that some works by the developer were non-compliant, as additional fire separation works and modifications have had to be undertaken since occupation took place. How did Premier sign off those works in the first place? It is plainly evident that there has been a general lack of supervision of the development during its construction and a lack of inspections by the approved inspector. If it finds too many faults, it will have to pay out under its own insurance policy, funded by the developer. It is therefore easy to see how the temptation to be less than thorough could arise.

My constituents have been let down. The ombudsman has proven toothless and the Solicitors Regulation Authority ineffective. Indeed, anyone who cares to look at Trustpilot ratings for the ombudsman, the SRA and Premier will

see that there is very little customer satisfaction anywhere in the country. There is a wholesale failure of regulation across the board on many issues, including in this case and others we have heard about. It is time that the Minister and the Government listened and sorted out this shambles once and for all.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): We will have to drop the time limit on speeches to three minutes.

3.7 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I have been involved in planning for most of my working life. I wrote "Open Source Planning", which helped to guide the reforms of 2010 and 2011; I helped to draft the national planning policy framework; I sat on the local expert planning group, which sought to simplify planning; and most recently I have been the Government champion for neighbourhood planning.

My conclusion from all of that is that the plan-led system we now have is so complex, with so many layers and so many tweaks, that it is no longer fit for purpose, particularly in relation to the delivery of housing. The plan-led system is

"less effective than at any time in the post-war era".

Those are not my words but the words of Nick Raynsford, whose report on this I found very interesting.

Affordable housing is falling by the wayside. Its quality is highly dubious, and there is a loss of public trust in planning as the most fundamental aspect of this approach. A fundamental reform is required, and I am happy to remove the party political influence of councillors from individual applications, because I am keen to ensure that neighbourhood plans play a much greater role in keeping the involvement of local people in the planning system.

However, there is one more important reform that we should bring in: the use of mediation in the planning system, instead of a costly appeals mechanism. In 2008, the Killian Pretty review said that an alternative dispute resolution—meaning mediation—should be used as a speedy alternative to appeals. The essence of mediation, of course, is that the mediator decides nothing. The process is facilitative and allows the parties to the case to formulate their own solutions under guidance. It can be used for highways, compulsory purchase, sorting out claims however they arrive, and sorting out the thorny issues of section 106 agreements. There is a role for mediation at the beginning of the process in generating the scope of a project and ensuring that local views or needs are included.

Why should mediation even be considered? First, it has been an outstanding success in other areas, including the construction industry, where it is used effectively, but also in other areas of life. The essence of that should be used in the planning system to speed up reform.

3.10 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) on securing this debate. I have two specific and brief questions for the Minister. The first concerns the first homes scheme. The Government's consultation document on the scheme, released last month, includes an extraordinary sentence. It states:

"We are mindful of the trade-off between the level of ambition for First Homes, funded through developer contributions, and the supply of other affordable housing tenures."

[Anneliese Dodds]

Yet, astonishingly, the consultation mandates that section 106 must be used to deliver first homes, rather than asking whether that is appropriate in the first place. We should not use section 106 contributions for this, especially at the late stage when many local plans have just been concluded or are in contention, and without any ameliorative action to preserve local councils' abilities to facilitate council and other social housing.

I note that my own local authority has already been prevented by the Government's planning inspectorate from requiring developer contributions to social homes from smaller sites. There are already problems, which will be massively exacerbated if the first homes scheme is ruled out in such a way. Will the Minister commit to conduct a proper impact assessment on the impact of the first homes proposal on the provision of new social homes? Secondly, on the Oxford-Cambridge arc, some contest the need to have any additional housing along the arc. I am not one of them, and I very much concurred with some of the words spoken by the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) when it comes to the need for additional housing and looking at the issue in a manner that is not hypocritical.

As for the arc, I am astonished that the Government have not provided even a signal or an expectation on two critical issues: first, the proportion of new homes, which should be available for social rent and genuinely affordable; and secondly, the energy efficiency and broader environmental performance of those new homes. It is not good enough to suggest that local authorities will deal with all the issues. The Oxford-Cambridge arc is a central Government programme, staffed with dozens of central Government civil servants, and central Government have the power, should they wish to use it, to ensure that the new homes are genuinely affordable, that they include many social homes, and that they are sustainable.

Finally, will the Minister please commit to determining two targets or standards, or even just expectations, for the arc for the percentage of new homes that should be affordable, including social homes, and for the expected environmental performance of the homes?

3.13 pm

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): We all know the drawbacks of the planning system. In areas such as mine, which comes under the jurisdiction of Calderdale Council, we have a local authority that is not only risk-averse when it comes to enforcement, but is driven by the multitude of Government targets around house building to the detriment of everything else. Today I want to highlight the issues around local plans. Calderdale still has not had that signed off and is in the midst of yet another consultation via the planning inspectorate. I want to make it clear that I do not have an issue with the numbers of houses. Whether it is one or 50,000 extra homes, the reality is that we need to build homes. The problem is our infrastructure, and without a robust infrastructure plan to sit alongside a local plan, the local plan is undeliverable.

We all know the issues across our constituencies with failing and stretched infrastructure. On roads, as well as the many pinch points across Calder Valley, we see a single road in and out of the Upper Calder Valley. Whether it is the single lane that we have had to endure

for three years while flood defences are built, or whether it is roadworks, not to mention accidents, we have to sit in our cars often for more than an hour just to travel a few miles. On the numerous days throughout the year when the M62 is closed, it does not matter where one lives in the Calder Valley, the roads are like car parks, and that is just the roads.

Our clinical commissioning group has recently announced that five GP surgeries will close because of an inability to recruit GPs to the area. School places are also an issue, particularly in the Lower Calder Valley, where our excellent schools are all over-subscribed. The local authority will say that it has infrastructure improvements within the plan, but its plans do not even touch the sides of the already stretched infrastructure, let alone if a further 15,000 homes are added over the next 15 years.

The final issue that I want to touch on around infrastructure is flooding. The Calder Valley and other parts of Calderdale have just experienced their third 100-year flood in just over seven and a half years. We had 1,187 properties flooded this time. Many of the 650 homes experienced their third flood. Small micro-businesses were flooded, too. There is not one piece of feasibility on flooding on the many dozens of sites in our local plan, and many—in my estimate about 40% of the land parcels—are already flood plains for when it rains. One particular site in Brighouse, earmarked for 200 houses, was six feet under water. Another in Greetland, with 600 homes, was like a waterfall. Finally, I have no confidence in our local authority to amend things at the planning stage.

I have two asks of our fabulous Housing Minister. First, why is there such a bypass of infrastructure requirements within local plans, and why are we allowing that to happen? Secondly, I have much evidence of our local authority ignoring infrastructure requirements for housing plans on flood plains. Now is surely the time to say, "No more building on flood plains or in areas where there is a high flood risk."

3.16 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): It used to be said that an Englishman's home is his castle, but our suburbs are now changing. We have mixed communities. The targets that local authorities are under and the deregulation of planning means that castles in the air are springing up round our way, literally changing the physical form. It might have been called high-rise hell in a different age. London's highest building is not in the square mile. It has just been approved by the Ealing planning committee and will be 55 storeys in North Acton. Because our capital is girdled by green belt, literally the only way is up. The sky is the limit. Tall buildings raise a range of questions on space standards and air quality. Post-Grenfell we have all heard horror stories of cladding and fire safety. Of the 551 buildings approved last year in London, 450 were residential, with 24 in Ealing, but that is dwarfed by 64 in Greenwich. Groups such as Stop the Towers argue that the new buildings are changing the low-rise, low-density nature of suburban Ealing, and the new developments all seem to come with youth-oriented marketing. One wonders how many more vibrant quarters Ealing can take, particularly as we have an ageing population everywhere. Demographically we know that very soon a majority of the population will be over 60, and people in social

housing who come to my surgery want rehousing to the ground floor because of mobility issues. People in their suburban semis, their huge piles, want to sit on those because the new developments are too small to have the grandchildren round.

At the other end of the age scale, in North Acton there is a thing called the Collective, which involves co-living. *The Telegraph* describes it as the future of renting. There are huge communal spaces, brunches, daily speakers and live music, but tiny accommodation designed for celibacy. [*Laughter.*] It is not cheap. One has to be in work and able to afford £1,000 a month. So what is my solution? I urge the Minister to take seriously my proposal to have a suburban taskforce. We have crumbling infrastructure and older housing stock alongside hideous towers. He could take a multi-dimensional approach. His predecessor was very warm towards this, but, alas, he has been shuffled off the ministerial coil. May I have a meeting with the Minister? A whole bunch of us, including Conservative Members, want to take this forward to save our suburbs.

3.19 pm

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): It is an honour to speak under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) on securing this important debate. He gave a powerful speech on one of the most pressing issues that the Government face. I also welcome my right hon. Friend the Minister to his new role.

I want to concentrate on one important issue that has become all too poignant for many of my constituents, as well as for other people around the country, in recent weeks. That issue is flooding, whose impact in my area has been overwhelming. Although it has not been as great as in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker), we have still had our problems. When there is flooding in my constituency it is not necessarily because not enough money is being spent on sea or river defences, or dredging, important as they are. It is a question of new homes being built directly on flood plains when the existing homes in that area are already prone to flooding. I am talking about flooding that happens as a direct result of already overburdened local drainage systems and waterways getting worse, and as a consequence of a lack of the infrastructure that should be put in place prior to housing development. Conditions become worse for residents of existing and new properties.

It is not so much, today, that existing communities disagree with local authorities about whether infrastructure should come before, during or after the building of new homes; it is more that they feel dismayed at the rejection of the need to build it at all. Local authorities act as if they are oblivious to the obvious need for infrastructure, and we need to address that. It is as though we have become fixated on house building targets, regardless of the consequences, and that is having a damaging effect on many communities. The quality of life that a house gives is as important as the numbers that are built, for that is what turns a house into a home.

To take my constituency as an example, Bankfield Lane is prone to flooding. It is not close to the sea or a river, or at the bottom of a hill. It is prone to flooding because the drainage system is used by more than 500 homes and is already stretched. It cannot cope

any more. After a storm, rainwater simply cannot flow away fast enough, so when it rains it floods. Storm Ciara left, at the end of the weekend, anguish and devastation and thousands of pounds of damage. Improvements have to be carried out. The utility company United Utilities says that the matter needs to be addressed, but it is in disagreement with the council about who should pay. While that stand-off continues, my constituents' lives are being affected.

We must provide incentives and flexibility for councils, which are rightly concerned about the necessity of meeting housing targets, to reject applications if there is insufficient infrastructure. We must protect individuals whose homes are already subject to flooding. We do not want to make things worse for those who are about to get new homes to live in. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will be able to tackle the challenge head-on.

3.22 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Problems need solutions—and here is one. Within London's green belt alone there are enough non-green sites surrounding train stations for more than 1 million new homes. Of course, truly green sites should be protected. My frustration is not with parks, hills or areas of environmental protection, but with the scrappy plots of land in towns and cities, surrounding railway stations, that no one in their right mind would see as attractive. I am talking about the car wash in Tottenham Hale, the scrubland in Ealing, the waste plant in Hillingdon and the concrete airfield in Wisley—sites that no one in their right mind would recognise as green belt if it were not for their designation.

Despite the strength of the green-belt brand, 80% of London's green belt is inaccessible to the public as green space and does not even have an environmental status. Together, those scrappy plots of what I refer to as the grey belt remain wrongly designated, just because of the potential furore that de-designation might cause. It is time to burst the myth that all green belt is green, and use those non-green sites to provide the homes that we so desperately need. I read with interest this weekend the comments of the former Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), about his plan for the upcoming Budget, and his belief that the green belt around major train stations should be reviewed. I wait with cautious optimism to see whether that will happen under the new Chancellor.

Of course, de-designation is one thing, but what the land is used for is another. If any green-belt land is released, it should be fundamental that it be used to help to resolve the housing crisis, providing the social and genuinely affordable homes for which our country is so desperate. To offer it instead as a land bank bonus for the biggest house builders would seem inexcusable to the thousands of my constituents waiting for a place to call home. I ask the Minister please to grasp the nettle of the sensible policy I have outlined—but to use the land for the people who need it most. Otherwise we will be back in this Chamber debating even worse statistics in the months and years ahead.

3.24 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): I am a Greater Manchester MP, so the proposed strategic housing plan for my area for the next 20 years is the Greater Manchester

[James Daly]

spatial framework. The planning system has created a scenario predicated on the building of three, four and five-bedroom houses on the green belt. That cannot be right. There is no requirement within the Greater Manchester spatial framework to provide affordable housing—certainly not truly affordable housing. The present definition of affordable housing means that most of the people in my constituency cannot afford an affordable house. We need to amend that and prioritise development. We need to incentivise development on brownfield sites within boroughs, and within plans.

We must look at how the population projections in particular are calculated. The GMSF is built on population projections from 2014 figures from the Office for National Statistics. If the housing numbers were based on the most recent figures, which are the 2018 figures, that would mean that in a seat such as mine, and in the Metropolitan Borough of Bury, no green belt would have to be built on. The planning system must be fair. It must produce plans based on the most accurate and recent information. I urge the Minister to consider insisting that local authorities use the most recent figures rather than 2014 figures, and prioritise truly affordable housing. We cannot have a situation where developers get to take the easy way out, building houses at £400,000 and £500,000, which cater to only a small number of people in my constituency.

My last point echoes what some of my hon. Friends have said. Within the Greater Manchester spatial framework, new schools, roads and doctors' surgeries are required. At the moment they are merely words on a piece of paper. There is no requirement within the document. Planning officers tell me that they will be built. There is no guarantee that they will be built, but I believe there is an absolute guarantee that the green belt will be built over by three, four and five-bedroom houses. We must find a way to get cast-iron guarantees, before planning permission is granted, that infrastructure will be put in place to support the thousands of extra houses that are proposed—certainly in my area.

3.27 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) on securing this timely and important debate. The standard of the contributions shows how important it is.

It is a truism to say that planning is a challenge and difficult. We have heard in the past hour or so of different experiences from around the country. My constituency is no different. We have a unique set of circumstances. The previous council administration was kicked out last May, having created problems that built up over a nearly 15-year period—without a plan, with too much speculative development, and with a failure to put infrastructure in place—and a new administration is trying to clear up the mess. The challenge is the relatively blunt instruments inherent to the planning system. In the two minutes I have left, I want to point out to the new Minister—whom I welcome to his position—three such blunt instruments. I hope that he will consider their implications on a larger scale.

The first is the overall framework. The challenge with some of the numbers going through the system, which are having an impact on districts such as mine, is that

we are trying to use a national planning policy framework that is supposed to solve problems as disparate as those of Westmorland and Lonsdale, Ealing Central and Acton and North East Derbyshire. That means it does not work well. I should like some form of regional assessment within the NPPF so that we do not need, in the east midlands, to put 6,500 houses in a part of the world where real-terms house prices—the best proxy for demand—have not risen since 2008.

Secondly, I share some of my colleagues' concerns about neighbourhood plans. When my area's previous district council administration failed to discharge its responsibilities adequately, parish councils stepped up and tried to fill the gap by passing neighbourhood plans. That gave the unique opportunity of having them signed off by referendums in local communities. Yet, as a result, limited protections are offered. I hope that that can be considered in the future.

Finally, as to the adoption process, which is under way with the new administration in my district, there is a unique issue on which I hope we can somehow get a little more flexibility and pragmatism into the system as a whole. In our part of the world, too much speculative development over the past decade and a half means that we will significantly exceed our own, in my view overinflated, target, which was set by the previous council administration. Yet the inspector is showing only limited pragmatism, at the end of our local plan process, in terms of removing green belt, which still needs to be done to give confidence in the overall local plan process. I hope my remarks have been helpful for the Minister.

3.30 pm

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) for initiating this important debate. We have heard from hon. Members of all political colours, representing areas rich in diversity, about the multiple problems with our housing market and planning. We have also heard many proposed solutions. That in itself is a real warning sign.

We should accept that the housing market is like an ecosystem or biosphere of interconnected dependencies and feedback mechanisms. When we put an intervention in one side, it goes into a black box that policy makers must deal with, and something unexpected pops out the other side. This is fiendishly complicated, but we must get it right. The price of failure is obvious: more unaffordable houses and continuing not to meet our supply targets. The prizes for getting it right are multiple and go across many policy areas—from solving homelessness, to local economic productivity and our sense of place. Building houses in the right place can contribute to food sustainability for our country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly) made the point well that we are building the wrong kinds of houses in the wrong places. It is as simple as that. If we focused on building more two-bedroom houses and bungalows, we would free up capacity for people who are, frankly, over-occupying larger houses, and that would help the whole system. That, however, relies on liquidity in the market, where stamp duty is a real issue, because it acts as a brake on social mobility as well as on liquidity.

I was struck by the comments by the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq). We are blessed with a modern problem: people are living longer, happier, wealthier and more independent lives. That is wonderful. In so doing, however, they are staying in their homes for longer. We must sort out supply and liquidity, and we need homes that are more sustainable, affordable, appropriate to their area and proportionate to the areas they surround.

3.33 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Charles, if not that of the Procedure Committee. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) on securing this debate. I agreed with you beforehand, Sir Charles, that I would keep my remarks short to allow other hon. Members to speak, given that this issue is largely devolved. It has certainly been an interesting debate.

I want to reflect on the planning and housing situation in Scotland. There has been a lot of discussion today about affordable housing, but it is us in Scotland who are trying as hard as possible to deliver 50,000 affordable homes, 35,000 of which will be for social rent, by 2021. We are certainly on track to do that. In my own constituency, Cranhill has an over-55s development, which is important given that people are living longer. Likewise, properties on Cunningham House on Shettleston Road are being built to Passivhaus standard, which is good for energy efficiency measures.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Member agree that we have a duty to do our best to push for more affordable green homes, and that grants and incentives to cover the costs of renewable and low-carbon innovations must go in hand with greener obligations? In other words, we must meet our obligations for climate change.

David Linden: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman, who chairs the all-party parliamentary group for healthy homes and buildings. Investing in greener homes is costly. Investing in the Passivhaus standard homes in Shettleston has cost Shettleston Housing Association quite a lot of money, but my constituents tell me that their energy bills are a lot lower.

I have concerns about the planning process. I often think of the Broomhouse estate in my constituency, which was supposed to start off as countryside living in the city, but it is now one of my largest polling districts. There is no school, GP practice or shop, and the local train station, in Baillieston, is now overrun by cars.

We often find that planning authorities—this is not confined to England—are more than happy to sign off on building lots of homes, not least because they provide lots of council tax revenue. It seems that little thought has been given to where the children living in those four or five-bedroom homes will go to school. We have seen the pressures put on, for example, Caledonia Primary School in Baillieston.

We have had a fantastic and wide-ranging debate. I have learned more about section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 than I knew this morning. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Harborough, who began by talking about the idea of fleecing. Some streets in my constituency have still not been adopted after 60 years. I used to think that was bad, but perhaps, given the situation he highlighted, it is a case of better the devil you know.

3.35 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) on securing this debate. His speech was comprehensive and full of good ideas, some of which he may have read in our policies. I have no doubt the Minister, however excellent or fabulous he is, will have benefited greatly from listening. I would go as far as to suggest that the hon. Member seeks membership of the upcoming Bill Committee where there will be lots of scope to legislate on the matters that he has raised today. The same could be said for other hon. Members who have contributed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) spoke of land reform—that £5 million piece of land eventually being auctioned from £25 million; I don't know what the final figure was. What an illustration of our failing system and our struggle to get the affordable homes we need. She linked housing and climate change, as well.

The hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) also recognised the crisis in housing and spoke of MPs being nimbys, opposing housing development in their constituencies—something for us all to think about. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) spoke of the shortage of professionals to manage planning. I know there is a crisis in that across the country. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) spoke of the leasehold scandal, with homebuyers misled and landed with huge ongoing bills. He said people have more rights if their kettle goes wrong.

My hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) spoke about her concerns about the first homes scheme. I have heard her speak several times about how new developers are being let off the hook on providing new affordable and social homes. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) talked about high-rises—they are 55 storeys high in her constituency, and there are more tower blocks across the piece. We need houses for our ageing population on the ground floor. My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) spoke about greenfield sites that are not very green, the million homes that could be built around railway stations and the wrong status for so-called green-belt land in her area.

Labour's plans for housing at the general election were bold and ambitious, but they were necessary. We said on day one that we would start the changes within Government to set up a department for housing, which I hope will happen soon. That would bring together the powers to plan and build new homes and regenerate existing housing across the country.

Despite the election result, Labour was right on housing and we will continue to make our case. We said that within the first year, we would take action to take profiteering out of the land market, which has a severe impact on planning and housing. We said we would revise planning rules and guidance to support the delivery of more genuinely affordable homes through the planning system and we said we would publish plans to make the country's homes greener and warmer with a new zero-carbon homes standard and retrofit programme.

[Alex Cunningham]

Our ambition was bold, and we encourage the Government to look at our manifesto closely and recognise the good ideas—some of which we share with Conservative Members, judging from some of the speeches we have heard this afternoon—for what they are. More importantly, we know that we must act. It is easy to talk about house building without recognising the obstacles in the way of doing so. Housing and planning go hand in hand. In order to plan, we must have the resources to do it, such as land. The broken land market is at the heart of our housing crisis. Land ownership, as we have heard, is often opaque, with little transparency on who owns what.

Public land has been sold off for a short-term profit as funding from central Government has dried up. As we have also heard, current planning rules and legislation give windfall gains to landowners and traders at the expense of local communities. We must do better, and work together to look at how we can ensure that our housing and planning system is genuinely fit for purpose.

I was interested to read the article written by the hon. Member for Harborough on what needs to happen to resolve the housing crisis. It was refreshing that he accepted in his article that after 10 years of his Government, we still have a housing crisis. I was pleased to see him outline that there are genuine problems and barriers with regard to housing, and he made a clear case for how these matters can be addressed.

I have spoken before about my 27-year-old researcher, who earns a good salary and has a second income from being a local councillor, but still cannot afford to buy a house in the area where she lives, far out in London's zone 6. She has been saving for many years and will save for many more to get a deposit, but then she will be ruled out due to her income not being high enough to get a mortgage. Her generation and the generations to come are doomed to fail unless we remove those barriers and make home ownership a reality rather than a dream. But for that to happen, we need to build more homes—not just homes but genuinely affordable homes that people with a range of incomes can afford. However, if local councils and housing associations cannot afford the land on which to build those affordable homes, they will be halted before they can even get going.

Large spaces of land are too expensive for councils and housing associations, so instead—as the hon. Gentleman outlined in quite some detail—smaller developments are often the only option. That means we are not hitting the capacity that we need to. It is all well and good for private developers to buy land and build housing, yet more often than not such property is tiny flats in prime central London locations that ordinary people cannot afford to live in. The flats around Battersea power station are an example—they probably call them “apartments” around there, mind. That area is a prime location, but the properties are bought up by people who can afford to buy them yet do not live in them. If anyone goes past those properties in the evening, they will see that most of the lights inside are off. Such developments add to the total number of dwellings that are built, but they are not being occupied by the people who most need a home: those who cannot afford to buy a home in any part of London, let alone a central part where they may be living already in sub-par

accommodation with several other people; and those who grew up in these areas, and are now priced out of staying there.

It is not good enough just to view building homes as the answer. There need to be those genuinely affordable homes, which is what the planning system must account for. Labour's plan would have meant that at least 150,000 new council and housing association homes a year would have been built within five years—decent homes that people can actually afford to live in. I do not expect this Government or any Conservative Government to match our pledge on the issue or even to come close to it, but the system has to change.

David Linden: I am listening to what the hon. Gentleman is saying about making sure that we invest in council housing and housing association properties. However, one of the things that I am very struck by when looking at the system here is this obsession with the right to buy, which so often means that housing associations and councils are building these properties only to flog them off. Is it Labour's proposal to abolish the right to buy, which is what we have seen in Scotland?

Alex Cunningham: There is no doubt about it; there is this bias towards owning a home, and time and again we hear MPs, particularly on the Government side, talking about that ambition. These days, however, many people, even well-paid researchers in Parliament with a second income, cannot afford to do that, so we have to address homes for rent as well.

Currently, it feels that we have piecemeal development, with half a dozen flats built here and a few houses built there. That will never address what we need, and so we have longer and longer housing waiting lists, and people are being priced out of the private sector, as the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) has just mentioned.

One way in which we can show we are taking housing and planning seriously is by empowering local authorities to strengthen their planning departments. They really need more planning officers. I think that most planning officers now work in the private sector, popping up at all these appeals that are held across the country, and of course it is the developers who win out at the end of the day. However, councils do not just need resources; they also need the confidence and the guidance from Government in order to crack on with things.

Dr Huq: My hon. Friend is making a brilliant speech. Does he agree that conservation officers also seem to have been cut from every council, as well as design review panels, and that beauty is being sacrificed in this transactional way?

Alex Cunningham: It is not just happening in the planning sector; it is happening across local authorities. My own local authority in Stockton has lost more than half its budget since 2010, so there is a shortage of expertise across the piece in local government to hold developers and other organisations to account.

I back what the Royal Town Planning Institute has argued for, which is championing civic planning, and building strong and responsive local planning authorities. The RTPI has also recommended that central Government do more by providing grants for social housing, by providing stronger direction on suitable land for housing,

and by sharing more of any land value uplift with the public and using that uplift in value to fund affordable housing. The ideas are there and the hon. Member for Harborough has helped the Minister immensely.

That said, I also value the hon. Gentleman's contribution to the ongoing debate in Parliament about how we can move forward on housing in the best way possible, and I look forward to hearing more of what he has to say in the future. However, the bottom line, which is where I have just got to in my speech, is that it is up to the Government to be prepared to take the steps to make change happen.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Minister, will you leave just two minutes at the end for Mr O'Brien to wrap up, please?

3.45 pm

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): I certainly will do that, Sir Charles, and it is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

It is also a great pleasure to follow my old friend the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), and to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) on securing this important debate, and I also thank him for the entirely unsolicited testimonial that he gave me at the start of his remarks. I also thank and congratulate all right hon. and hon. Members for their presence today. The number of colleagues from across the House who have attended the debate is testament to Members' interest in and concern about this important topic. I thank them all for being here.

I will now address some of the important points raised by hon. Members. I am conscious that I do not have a huge amount of time, so if I am not able to address them all, I certainly contract to meet with or write directly to those I miss, to ensure that we cover all the points that have been raised today effectively.

One of the key issues, raised by a number of colleagues, is unfair practices in the leasehold market. Let me say that those practices have no place in a modern housing market, and neither do excessive ground rents, which exploit consumers, who get nothing in return. That is why we are reforming the system so that it is fairer to leaseholders.

In December 2019, we announced that we would move forward with legislation on leasehold reform, reaffirming our commitment to making the system fairer and more transparent. The Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall), will have more to say about that as the Minister responsible for that legislation; I shall certainly relay to him the concerns that Members from all parties have raised in the debate today.

I also agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough that we want to minimise the effect of inappropriate access routes for construction vehicles by encouraging temporary access routes that should ideally be delivered through voluntary arrangements. We have all faced the issue in our constituencies; I have faced it specifically with respect to wagons building the High Speed 2 railway line. I hope that I can give my hon. Friend some reassurance that we have legislated for local authorities and other acquiring bodies to compulsorily

purchase land temporarily under the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017, and we are engaging with the sector on how best to implement those powers.

It is important that breaches of planning conditions are tackled by local planning enforcement teams, given that conditions are often imposed by councils to make a development acceptable to local people. That is why we have provided nearly £2 million of funding this year to help to strengthen enforcement teams in 37 local authorities, and we have also updated the National Association of Planning Enforcement's practical handbook to help.

We will also outline further measures to help to improve local authority enforcement in the forthcoming planning White Paper, so I hope that Members will forbear and bear with me as that White Paper is released. I hope that that satisfies colleagues about some of the concerns that my hon. Friend raised.

Jack Lopresti: Does the Minister agree that our party needs to end the obsession with the green belt? Does he also accept that if we leave house building to local councils, houses will not get built in anywhere near the numbers that we need?

Christopher Pincher: The green belt is very important. We need to ensure that green spaces are protected, and that we have beautiful spaces in which we can all live. We also need to ensure that local plans are up to date and fit for purpose, in order to ensure that the houses that people want and need can be built.

That brings me rather nicely to my fundamental point. We all know that this country does not have enough homes. That is why we need a more agile and flexible planning system. KPMG and Shelter have both reported that simply to meet rising future demand, a minimum of a quarter of a million new homes will be needed every year. The median house price in England is eight times higher than median gross annual earnings; in London, it is 12.3 times higher.

We have to be bold and ambitious in our vision for the future of planning and house building in England. That is why, in January 2018, we set up Homes England as our housing accelerator, to intervene in the market and drive a step change in housing delivery. We have an unwavering commitment to enable the housing market to deliver at least 300,000 new homes a year by the mid-2020s, and a million homes by the end of this Parliament. I am pleased that the latest figures show that last year housing supply, which has been growing year on year, increased by more than 241,000, to the highest level in the last 31 years.

Siobhain McDonagh: Will the Minister give way?

Christopher Pincher: I will, of course, give way to the hon. Member, as she intervenes at such volume.

Siobhain McDonagh: In the London borough of Merton, 10,000 families are on the waiting list. Since April 2019, they have had access to 18 three-bedroom properties. What does the Minister say to those 10,000 families?

Christopher Pincher: I would say that we need to build more homes in London. That is a conversation that we are having with the Mayor and with local authorities, because if we are to get those people into homes that they desire, we need to ensure that we are building them.

[Christopher Pincher]

We have also cut the red tape—a perennial *bête noire*—making it quicker to plan and build homes that people want to live in. However, there is far more that we need to do to address the housing challenge. We are implementing planning reforms to ensure that our planning system creates and supports thriving communities, and to improve the quality, quantity and speed of home building. As I said, we will introduce the planning White Paper shortly, setting out our proposals to make the planning process clearer, more accessible and more certain for all users, including homeowners and small businesses, and I look forward to responses from colleagues across the House. The White Paper will also address resourcing and performance in planning departments, which various colleagues mentioned, and ensure that timely decisions are made.

The Government set national planning policy, but it is important that decisions and policies are made locally. We are clear that councils and their communities are best placed to take decisions on planning issues affecting their local area within the context of national planning policy. Local plans play an important role in outlining the homes that an area needs, and I believe that such plans can deliver local decisions that will remain at the heart of the planning system. Local plans provide clarity to communities and developers about where new homes should be built and how they should look, and such plans identify what developments are needed in an area, supported by the right infrastructure.

Alex Cunningham: Will the Minister give way?

Christopher Pincher: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman briefly; I am conscious that time is pressing.

Alex Cunningham: The developer Persimmon applied for planning permission for a large site on Junction Road in my constituency. It was told, “No, you can’t have planning permission.” The Government inspectorate overturned that decision. How are we going to strengthen the powers of local authorities, so that when they make a decision, having consulted the local community, that decision stands? Now Persimmon wants to build even more homes on the same site.

Christopher Pincher: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I do not know the specific case, but we need to ensure that the codes that we use, and those that the Planning Inspectorate uses, are fit for purpose, to ensure that when a good plan is introduced, for a site that has appropriate permissions, those developments are built.

Plans that are needed in an area, supported by the right infrastructure, help to ensure that what is planned for is sustainable rather than the result of speculative applications. That also ensures that we build in greater community support. So far, 90% of councils have an adopted local plan compared with just 17% in 2010. Some are a little long in the tooth, but I am pleased that the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough adopted local plans for both his authorities in 2019, so those plans are nearly brand new.

I assure the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) that the Government are committed to reviewing permitted development rights

for the conversion of buildings to residential use, particularly respecting the quality and standards of those buildings. The review will report, and I will ensure that the report is available to her in due course.

It is also crucial that local authorities plan for the right number of homes. That is why, in July 2018, we introduced a new standard method to assess the minimum number of homes that an area needs. It does not set a target; it is simply a starting point from which authorities consider any constraints, and see whether need is more appropriately met in neighbouring areas. Following the latest household projections, the standard method was changed to ensure that it was consistent with delivering the homes that the country needs. We are reviewing the method and will consult on longer-term options in due course, because we recognise that we need to diversify the products on the market in order to drive up supply.

I will say a few words on small and medium-sized enterprises before I let my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough wind up. We are supporting SME housebuilders with a package of measures to help the sector to grow and develop, including the home building fund, the housing growth and housing delivery fund, the ENABLE Build guarantee scheme, and our ongoing reforms to the planning system, more of which he will hear about in due course. We believe that SMEs have a key part to play by increasing their output, as the biggest home builders in our country will not meet the Government’s housing building target alone. SMEs are well placed to help to deliver new homes, welcomed in their communities rather than resisted, and those homes will be built to last. Not only do we need to supply more homes, but we need to make the dream of home ownership, as the hon. Member for Stockton North called it, a reality.

I hope that Members can see that the Government are truly committed to addressing the problems raised in the debate. We know that we need to build more of the right homes, of the right quality and in the right places, so that the housing market works for all parts of our community. We are determined to do that, and I invite all hon. and right hon. Members to step up to the plate and help us to tackle that challenge.

3.58 pm

Neil O’Brien: I thank all Members who have taken part in this afternoon’s brilliant debate. I was encouraged by the Minister’s words, particularly on temporary access. I strongly agree with the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) in his coruscating critique of the fleecing industry. They are the timeshare salesmen and the dodgy wheel-clampers of our generation, and I hope that the Minister will clamp down on them very strongly. Perhaps the new homes ombudsman can be the vehicle for that.

I agree with the question posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly) about what affordable housing is. I think that the type of tenure most missing is cheap rented housing for working people. Although affordable housing is hugely needed, and my local council in Harborough has built a record amount of it, we need something for those people who are earning a bit and do not get social housing.

I was struck by the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) about developer contributions. We must not go over the top, but on the

other hand there is a reason why all economists agree that taxes on land and development are different from other types of taxes. If we lose developer contributions, we typically do not get more houses—just higher land prices and a bigger windfall for the lucky landowner.

Finally, there was a good challenge from my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti). We do need to build more houses. France has built twice as many houses as us since 1970, and French house prices have gone up half as much. Places such as the Netherlands have built more too. We need to learn from them. It is not about shoving more houses through the system; it is about having a proper, plan-led system to do it.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Innovation in the NHS

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered innovation in the NHS.

It is a delight and a pleasure to have secured this important debate. We are going through an incredible time, with advances in technology across so many different fields, and there is a big question about how the national health service can adopt this important technology that makes such a difference to people's lives. There is so much potential in the healthtech sector that has led to a transformation in patient outcomes, and that capacity must be expanded within the national health service. Some good work has already taken place to deliver innovation within the NHS, through the structures and approaches established by NHS Digital, Health Data Research UK and NHSX, which is creating the right framework to deliver innovation. However, if the true potential of the NHS is to be harnessed and if innovation is to feed through to trusts right across the country, there needs to be a dramatic acceleration of health technology.

Despite the presence of innovation accelerators such as HS. and bodies such as the Accelerated Access Collaborative, designed to find ways to help innovation products reach patients more quickly, there remain barriers that restrict the ability of healthtech businesses to scale effectively and get their products to market. The first challenge is the speed of the pathway to adoption. NHS Improvement estimates that it takes an average of 17 years for a new product or device to go from successful clinical trial to mainstream adoption, a figure that was highlighted by the Secretary of State earlier this year. Considering the rapid pace of technological change, that is a very concerning statistic for the healthtech business.

Historically, a good deal of that time was taken up by National Institute for Health and Care Excellence appraisals. In 2012, statistics released about the timelines for appraisals showed that the average time for multi-technology appraisals was 5.5 years, and about 2.5 years for single-technology appraisals. The Minister might be interested to know that I will host an event in a couple of weeks, in conjunction with AbbVie, to launch a report entitled "Bridging the Gap between Clinical Trials and Real-World Practice". That research found that breakthrough medicines that might address high unmet medical needs and have been earmarked for fast-track approval are approved on average one month later than non-prioritised medicines, meaning that patients have slower access to those medicines.

Overall, that report found that approval processes take significantly more time in England than in other European countries, including Germany and France. It also found that NICE is more likely to place restrictions on new medicines than are other countries. On a more positive note, although NICE takes longer to assess medicines, it has one of the highest approval rates among health technology assessment bodies, meaning that a greater number of medicines are available. Although there have been significant positive improvements to the process since 2012, which have greatly accelerated it—for

[Chris Green]

example, the medical technologies guidance, as well as the digital health technologies pilot scheme within that guidance—a lot more needs to be done so that those benefits can reach across the entire health sector.

A bigger concern is the funding opportunities available to healthtech businesses when they have an appraisal. Funding is obviously one of the most important building blocks for growth, but even if a healthtech business has had a NICE appraisal, there is no guarantee that its product will be adopted within the national health service. The medtech funding mandate and schemes such as the AI innovation award within the AAC are welcomed, but there should be greater emphasis on ensuring that centres are allocated the required funding from the NHS, so that they can pay for the devices and services and utilise them to improve patient outcomes.

Furthermore, the current criteria for the inclusion of new medical devices are based on how savings are generated within one year, which can be challenging given the higher up-front costs. For example, complicated surgical implants can be expensive, but can save money for the system through reduced spending on drugs and social care. There are also incoming regulatory barriers that will harm the healthtech sector's ability to sell its products and the UK's ability to be a competitive market for innovation. At present, medical devices are operating within the three-year transition period that ends in May 2020, after which devices on the market must fully comply with the medical devices regulation. There is a concern that the lack of notified bodies designated under the MDR may prevent the industry from getting life-changing products to market.

Currently, at a time when the industry will be rushing to ensure its devices are compliant with new regulations, only six notified bodies across the EU are authorised to accept work related to the forthcoming MDR. It is of concern that there is only one notified body in the UK, the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency. There are growing concerns across the industry that a bottleneck will emerge, potentially causing innovative and cost-effective technologies to be taken off the market as they wait to be certified again under the MDR. In a recent *Med-Tech Innovation* survey, only 4.8% of businesses said they were sufficiently prepared for the new MDR, despite 55% of businesses having begun preparations for those changes over 12 months ago. That shows the extent to which the lack of notified bodies is affecting the sector.

The UK's departure from the EU presents an opportunity for the UK to establish itself as an international hub for certifications. Furthermore, with both the NHS long-term plan and the Government's prevention Green Paper highlighting the importance of technologies in easing pressures on health services, it is vital to ensure that new regulation does not instead stifle innovation or discourage global medical device manufacturers from entering the UK market. I am also pleased by the Government's ambitious strategy to maintain the UK as a global leader in the life sciences, reflected in the life sciences sector deal and their commitment to spend 2.4% of GDP on research and development by 2027. We must make sure that the medical devices sector and the life sciences sector more broadly get their fair share of that investment in R&D.

There are therefore positives that we can point to, but there are still challenges that are holding back innovation. Although the work of the academic health science networks in spreading and driving innovation across the regions of England is welcome, large variations remain, especially in individual centres' attitudes towards health technology. AHSNs continue to play an important role in spreading best practice and therefore reducing variation across regions; however, the challenges facing healthtech companies in this area should not be underestimated. One challenge faced by technologies as they attempt to become adopted across the NHS relates to the differing nature and characteristics of individual centres. Due to the differing priorities and attitudes of centres across the country, medical device companies must employ different approaches as they roll out across the country. That inevitably delays the adoption of new technologies across the NHS, since individual companies must develop complicated strategies for each local business case. Some areas have more streamlined processes for adopting innovation, but it is by no means uniform, and will further the inequalities in healthcare between different regions. If a more joined-up approach towards innovation adoption were implemented across the NHS, medical technologies could be rolled out more quickly so that centres with the most need could access them.

In health and other sectors, it is always important and necessary to have leadership. I often hear about different trusts and centres that have strong leadership and that can, therefore, drive change. Other centres without such strong leadership are holding themselves back. I will discuss the chief innovation officer position later.

The UK's great potential for data research is well known. The UK has some excellent datasets, globally leading data scientists and the ambition to make the UK the home of data-driven life sciences research and innovation. In terms of data collection, however, the national health service does not behave as a single organisation. The potential of health data cannot be fully realised until structures and processes enable the interoperability and straightforward accessibility of datasets across the country.

Moreover, health data is globally competitive, with significant investment being made in improving the health data environment in other countries, including the USA, Germany, Israel, France and China. It is not an exact science, but NHS England estimates suggest that harnessing data and delivering on digital plans for the NHS could unlock productivity benefits of about £10 billion a year, allowing for greater investment in other priority areas.

An example of the industry working closely with health service bodies to tackle those challenges is the academic health science networks' production of an atrial fibrillation toolkit that concisely outlines the relevant data for innovators working to prevent AF-related strokes. The toolkit provides innovators with data on the proportion of patients in a local area diagnosed with AF who have not been anticoagulated and encourages innovators to gather local knowledge on waiting times, pathways and referral criteria.

Unlocking the potential of patient data is key to driving forward research and innovation. The NHS is a rich and unique source of patient data, but public trust and confidence in the use of data is vital. The public need to feel that they can trust and have confidence in

the health and social care system to share their information with care and confidence. People want to share their data, but they want to be confident that when their data is being shared, it will be used in the right way by the right organisations.

People are not necessarily hugely concerned by the private sector having access to their data, but they need more reassurance and more confidence in the anonymity that is provided in the data and in the control of the extent to which the data is given to companies, so they cannot just pass it on to other organisations. If the public do not trust the system, they will be unwilling to share their data for research. Ultimately, everyone is a loser from that—charities, the NHS and patients; there will be significant disadvantages across the sector in the UK.

It is essential that we continue to enhance the UK clinical research environment to ensure that global companies look to the NHS first when setting up trials for breakthrough therapies. An essential element for attracting R&D investment into the UK and reaching the Government's target of 2.4% of GDP is to enhance the UK's commercial clinical research offer.

Despite the significant size and growth of the global market for clinical research, the UK's share of clinical trial applications and patient recruits has fallen since 2016, with the UK falling behind the USA, Canada, Germany and Spain for commercial clinical trials. We must build on our strong scientific base and on existing NHS infrastructure and expertise to grow the UK's share of the global market and improve its commercial clinical trials offer.

The industry already supports the Government's commitments to clinical research in the life sciences industrial strategy, sector deals and the NHS long-term plan. To be at the forefront of clinical research, however, there needs to be a simplification of the processes for setting up and running clinical trials, harnessing the UK's data infrastructure for medicines and R&D, embedding patient involvement in clinical research and ensuring continuing high standards for transparency.

In my view, the challenges of adopting innovation in the NHS result, to some extent, from a lack of leadership in the NHS. The Secretary of State leads the way on getting health technology into the system. We need that culture to be better established in the national health service. No one within NHS trusts is specifically addressing the issue as part of their job. If more people were appointed to the chief innovation officer position in NHS trusts, the adoption of innovation might be accelerated. At the moment, about 20 chief innovation officers are in place. More such appointments would do two things: first, accelerate the adoption of innovation in the national health service and secondly, drive innovation and improvement to challenge and bring up to date legacy systems in the NHS.

In conclusion, I reiterate that there are many positives and much good practice to draw on, and there is no lack of ambition to place the NHS at the forefront of innovation. I look forward to the Minister's remarks.

4.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ms Nadine Dorries): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green)

for bringing the issue to Westminster Hall. I have heard him speak on the matter several times. In fact, hon. Members in the main Chamber yesterday will have heard him make those points and others with the passion that he showed today. As well as passion, he has something that makes us nervous—absolute knowledge and understanding of the subject. That is welcome, and his depth of knowledge on tech and innovation in the NHS makes him a welcome addition to the House.

My hon. Friend mentioned the AI award that has just been announced, the adoption of new products, data and clinical trials. I will make a few points about each of those topics at the end of my speech. As he said, not just the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, but everybody in the Department is passionate about high-tech innovation. Only yesterday, I heard about a new app called Skin Analytics. It has a phone attachment that takes an image of someone's mole or skin that can be sent through and almost instantly diagnosed as to whether it is skin cancer and requires further treatment. The rate at which AI and technology are accelerating daily is phenomenal.

We can transform the health of millions of patients, improve health outcomes, reduce cost and reinforce the UK's position as a global hub for life sciences and health tech within the Department, because we are so passionate about it. We can take advantage of those opportunities by seeing what can be achieved by using the technology that is becoming available daily. The UK has a world-leading single player health system, covering 65 million people and—I know that my hon. Friend knows this; I am almost embarrassed saying it—we are the biggest single buyer of medicines in the world. We have some of the world's best clinical researchers leading universities, charities and life science companies. Indeed, 25 of the world's 100 most used medicines were developed here, using a public and philanthropic research infrastructure that is, pound for pound, more effective than anywhere else in the world. We should be really proud of that, but we know we must go further.

The NHS long-term plan and the life sciences industrial strategy have set out an ambitious set of actions to create the most collaborative health innovation system in the world—one that gets the best new treatments and technologies from the bench to the bedside faster than ever before. It is beginning to make a difference, first through the Accelerated Access Collaborative, where leaders from across the NHS, patients, charities, industry and the Government are now coming together to tackle the major systemic barriers to the adoption and spread of innovation within the NHS. My hon. Friend is quite right to raise the fact that there have been barriers, but we are tackling the barriers now.

The AAC is supporting greater use of a range of proven innovations, which have the potential to benefit up to 500,000 patients and save the NHS up to £30 million; developing co-ordinated plans to ensure that the NHS is ready for transformative new technologies, such as the advanced therapy medicinal products—ATMPs—and the use of AI technologies in diagnostics and screening; and launching a new medtech funding mandate to drive the best value and most innovative medtech projects across the NHS. With long-term funding for the NHS in place, that collaboration is also now being backed by increased commercial flexibility—flexibility to ensure

[Ms Nadine Dorries]

we can make the best new treatments and technologies available to patients, while ensuring long-term affordability for the NHS.

The impact has already been felt, with Europe's first access deal for Kymriah and the breakthrough of the CAR-T—chimeric antigen receptor T-cell—therapy, just 10 days after the treatment's European marketing authorisation, and a pioneering Government collaboration with pharmaceutical company Novartis for the drug Inclisiran to tackle heart disease, which could save up to 30,000 lives over the next decade.

The 15 regional academic health science networks continue to support the local adoption of cutting-edge technologies. More than 3,500 innovations from more than 2,500 companies have benefited from support from the AHSNs in recent years, ranging from new blood tests for pre-eclampsia, which can significantly reduce life-threatening complications in pregnancy, to devices that improve bowel cancer screening.

Finally, we are working to digitally transform the NHS to unlock the technologies for the future. The plans are already being delivered by NHSX. For example, we recently announced a £250 million artificial intelligence lab, which will build and rapidly test cutting-edge prototypes, but the real focus will be on finding and boosting existing technologies and ensuring they can be adopted across the NHS. Over the next three years, the lab will support the £140 million AI Award, led by the AAC, which will be designed to speed up the testing and adoption of the most promising new AI-enabled technologies. It will cover stages of the product cycle from proof of concept, to real-world testing, to initial adoption in the NHS.

By working together across the health system, Government and industry to deliver improvements, we can ensure NHS patients are some of the first in the world to benefit from the best new treatments and technologies. We will ensure that the UK continues to have world-leading life science hubs, where the best innovations get from bench to bedside faster than ever before.

My hon. Friend made a number of specific points. He mentioned AbbVie and its "Bridging the Gap" report. I thank AbbVie for its valuable contribution to the work in this area and I thank my hon. Friend for his support of its report. I know my officials and the Office for Life Sciences have been engaging with the report's authors, as it has been developed, and they will be closely considering its recommendations. We have made a number of improvements to National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency processes since the data on which the report is based and published, including reforming the cancer drugs fund. I hope we are already beginning to see the benefits of those changes through quicker assessment rates.

I am going to speed up, so that I can get everything in. My hon. Friend mentioned the AI award. We believe the funding mandate and the AI award are a fantastic step forward in driving higher adoption of some of the most exciting new medtech in the NHS, but we know we may need to do more. We will learn from the first year of introduction, and we will continue to review how the schemes can be developed to support a wide range of projects in the future.

In terms of the adoption of new products, we recognise that in some cases new products will require a trust to adapt its care pathways or to train staff, and that is why we provided an additional £2 million a year to the AAC through our pathway transformation fund, to support adoption of the products it has selected for support.

I fully agree with my hon. Friend's comments on the importance of the UK's clinical trial system to patients and to our economy. The Government are committed to creating the best environment for clinical trials, both in achieving the ambitions set out in the life sciences industrial strategy and as we agree new future trade agreements. The system is coming together to deliver that. We have streamlined the Health Research Authority approval process to make clinical trial set-up faster. NHS England's long-term plan sets out an ambition to see a million people registering to participate in health research by 2023-24 and to treble commercial research in the health system over the next 10 years.

The National Institute for Health Research clinical research network has also recently completed a competition to establish five purpose-designed centres, dedicated to last phase commercial research within the NHS's capacity to deliver research. They will enable significant growth and provide more opportunities for patients to benefit from early access to innovation.

Finally, on making the best use of data for the NHS, which is of particular interest to me at the moment, with regard to the women's agenda and using datasets within the NHS, we fully agree that the better use of NHS data promises significant benefit for patients, including better ways of predicting and diagnosing illnesses and the development of more effective treatments. We have set up NHSX to drive forward the digital transformation of the NHS and to ensure it can make better use of its data and new technologies. The Government have also invested £37.5 million in the digital innovation hubs programme, which will improve the access to and the quality of NHS data through seven health data research hubs, but it is absolutely essential that we build and maintain public trust in this area. That is why the Office for Life Sciences sponsored a robust piece of public engagement, led by Understanding Patient Data, on the commercial uses of healthcare data.

We are also developing a policy framework, which makes it clear that all commercial uses of healthcare data must have an explicit aim to improve the healthcare and welfare of patients in the UK and address the key concerns of the public, such as robust governance processes and transparency requirements.

I shall end where I began, which is to thank my hon. Friend for bringing his depth of knowledge and expertise in this subject to the debate. As I said, from the Secretary of State to the Ministers involved in the Department of Health and Social Care and officials working there, we all see innovation and technology as a way of improving access for patients, improving patient outcomes, reducing costs and enabling access to better and quicker treatments. Because of that, we are totally supportive of both the innovation and the high-tech agenda. It is debates such as this one, and the subject being raised regularly in the House in the way that my hon. Friend does, that keep pushing that agenda forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Children and Domestic Abuse

4.29 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered children and domestic abuse.

It is a pleasure to have you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone, for a very timely debate. The Leader of the House and relevant Ministers—including the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who I am pleased will be responding to this important debate—committed to introducing the Domestic Abuse Bill at the earliest opportunity. I was pleased to see the Bill return to the House earlier today, and I congratulate the Minister on staying true to that commitment. I look forward to hearing her detail the Government's plans to support children affected by domestic abuse.

I want to continue on that positive note, because the Domestic Abuse Bill is a once-in-a-generation chance to deliver real change in how we respond to domestic abuse. When the Bill was introduced in the last parliamentary Session, there was much to be welcomed—not least the introduction of a definition of domestic abuse, which will help guide our response. It is commendable that the definition specifically identified the coercive control elements of abuse, which we know are all too common. There were also improvements to the Bill on the advice of the Joint Select Committee that undertook prelegislative scrutiny, including clarifications on the independence of the new domestic abuse commissioner to ensure that they can carry out their role as effectively as possible. It is also positive that the commissioner will be expected to encourage good practice in identifying children affected by domestic abuse, and I was pleased to see Nicole Jacobs appointed as the commissioner designate; she brings a breadth of experience in this area.

The Domestic Abuse Bill is a prime example of legislation that, if done well, stands a real chance of securing widespread support from hon. Members of all parties, and from outside the House. I am sure that every hon. Member present wants to ensure that we get it right, but the Bill is not perfect. The crux of my concerns is that the Bill fails to grasp the opportunity to truly take account of the needs of children affected by domestic abuse, which is why we are having this debate. It is an issue that was brought close to home by my constituent Christine, who is a survivor of domestic abuse. Christine came to see me about her experiences and about her concern that the needs of children are not properly taken into account when considering the impact of domestic abuse.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech and I congratulate her on securing this important debate. Does she agree that children who see, overhear or experience domestic abuse are sometimes at risk of copying that abuse and the behaviour of the person who survives it? Does she agree that there is greater need for specialist support for children who experience such abuse, and that the Government should take it seriously and try to fund that support?

Liz Twist: It is absolutely right—it is the crux of my argument—that we need to ensure that specialist and appropriate services are available for all children going through that experience.

My constituent Christine believes strongly that the effect of domestic abuse on children needs much more attention, so that they, too, can be helped to survive and thrive with the right emotional support. She told me that years after her leaving that abusive relationship, her daughter, who is now over 18, is still dealing with the damage caused by experiencing the abuse that her mother suffered. Christine is an amazing, strong woman and I am glad to be able to raise this issue for her.

I sincerely hope the Minister takes on board the points that come from the debate. I also hope she will work with organisations from across the children's sector and the violence against women and girls sector, which have informed today's proceedings, to ensure that the Bill addresses the needs of children and young people affected by domestic abuse.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): There is also the issue of abusive relationships between under-16s. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need the Government to look at that as well, and to consider recommendations so that we can help and better support children, particularly girls, who find themselves in those circumstances?

Liz Twist: I certainly do. I know it has been raised by some of the groups working on this issue, and it is important that we take that into account.

Worryingly, the evidence tells us that up to one in five children and young people are exposed to domestic abuse during their childhood. On average, 37 children's social care assessments that identify domestic violence as a feature of a child's life are undertaken each day in the north-east alone. However, they will not be seen as victims. Analysis indicates that over 800,000 children in England live in households that report domestic abuse, yet there are still shortcomings in the family courts that deal with domestic abuse cases, with a perpetrator of domestic abuse seen as a violent criminal in the criminal courts but as a "good enough" parent in the family courts.

Although we know that the consequences of such childhood experiences can be devastating and result in emotional, social, psychological and behavioural difficulties, there is significant variability around the country in the level of support available to children. In two thirds of local authorities taking part in a recent study by Action for Children, children face barriers to accessing support. In over 10% of such areas, no support services were available to children at all. Those are just some of the issues that the Bill must deal with if it is to live up to expectations and become the landmark piece of legislation that we all want it to be. I would welcome hearing how the Minister envisages the Bill supporting children affected by domestic abuse.

I want to highlight two key areas in the time I have left. I know that hon. Members will pick up a multitude of other concerns directly, from migrant children and their families through to the operation of the family courts, but time will not allow me to address them all. My first concern is about the definition of domestic abuse. Although it is welcome, the statutory definition will not, as it stands, include children, relegating them instead to the statutory guidance. That is problematic on a number of fronts, not least because the guidance is yet to be published.

[Liz Twist]

First and foremost, it worries me greatly that overlooking children in the definition of domestic abuse fails to recognise the serious impact that seeing, hearing or being otherwise exposed to domestic abuse perpetrated by one adult against another can have on children. In short, they will be considered witnesses to domestic abuse, rather than being recognised as victims themselves. Given that we know about the seriousness of the impact that this can have on children, such an approach is untenable.

Secondly, the Government have made it clear that frontline practitioners and public authorities, including the police and social services, are to adopt the Bill's definition in their day-to-day duties. However, I share the concerns of organisations across the children's sector that, if children are not included, it could affect how they are treated by the professionals coming into contact with their families. I therefore urge the Minister to consider broadening the Bill's definition of domestic abuse to include children.

My second key concern is about the provision of support services for children. I have already mentioned that domestic abuse can result in long-lasting impacts on a child's health, development, ability to learn and wellbeing. That is on top of increased risks of criminal behaviour and interpersonal difficulties in future intimate relationships and friendships. Analysis of the millennium cohort study shows that children whose parents reported experiencing domestic violence when children were aged three reported 30% higher than average antisocial behaviours at age 14, a finding that should be seen in the context of the trauma suffered by children who are affected by domestic abuse. With the right support, however, children can thrive in even the most difficult circumstances.

It is very concerning that the percentage of domestic abuse services providing dedicated support to children and young people fell from 62% in 2010 to just 52% in 2017. More alarming still, research from Action for Children suggests that that support is patchy at best, with significant variability in what is available for young people depending on where they are in the country. A fundamental part of the problem is the lack of clear requirements for delivering support services specifically for children who are impacted by domestic abuse. As a result, insufficient funding is allocated to providing a sustainable future for those vital projects.

Although the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's recent consultation on a statutory duty for accommodation-based services is welcome, clarity is needed on the all-important community-based services that support so many children and families, especially as they deal with many of the issues that accommodation-based services face. I recognise that that matter is not part of the Minister's brief, but I hope that she will both offer reassurances that the Government are looking at it and outline how non-accommodation-based support services will be provided and funded under the new statutory duty.

I am glad to lead this debate on the day that the Domestic Abuse Bill is introduced and very much hope that the Government will work to strengthen the Bill for children. I thank my constituent Christine, who so powerfully brought the issue to my attention.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 5.30 pm. I am obliged to call the Front-Bench spokespeople at no later than 5.12 pm. The guideline limits are five minutes for Her Majesty's Opposition, 10 minutes for the Minister, and two or three minutes for Liz Twist to sum up, but until 5.12 pm, we are in Back-Bench time. Three Members wish to speak, and I am determined that they should all get their fair share. We will start with Jim Shannon.

4.41 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Hollobone. That is quite easy to work out, with seven minutes each or thereabouts. I will do my best to keep to that and hopefully I will finish a wee bit sooner.

I thank the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for setting the scene. In the short time that she has been in the House, she and I—and many others who are present—have spoken about things of interest to us. I look forward to the contributions from other hon. Members, who will refer to the same issues as the hon. Lady, and I hope, that I will as well.

I know from the work that my constituency office does that domestic abuse is, very unfortunately, a common occurrence. That is sad in a society in which we hope that people will have understanding and respect for each other. Every one of those occasions in my constituency has involved a lady and, more often than not, her children, who have borne the brunt of the domestic abuse.

Women's Aid NI states:

“Children and young people have often been referred to as the hidden or forgotten victims of domestic violence. In recent years however, recognition that children and young people are impacted upon by domestic violence has spread, and policy and practice has begun to develop accordingly. It is important to remember that whole families suffer from domestic violence. For every woman experiencing violence in the home there will usually be children who are also suffering. The experiences of these children and young people are often overlooked.”

That is key to this issue. The hon. Lady referred to that very honestly in her contribution.

It is not just the lady who suffers abuse, but the children, and I will offer some examples from my constituency casework. I have witnessed at first hand the effect of domestic abuse on children when, through my constituency office, I have attempted to help women find their way out of abusive situations and into safe places. I put on the record my sincere thanks to those at North Down and Ards Women's Aid, who have often been the difference between life and death for women and a source of new starts for children in my constituency. Despite cuts in funding and an increase in paperwork, all that they do, as well as the compassion and dedication with which they do it, makes a difference.

I know that the Minister does not have responsibility for Northern Ireland, but when she has spoken in any debate that I have been involved in, she has always spoken with compassion and understanding, and has really grasped the issue. I think that every one of us is impressed by her ability to do that. I look forward to her response.

Between July 2018 and June 2019, there were 16,575 domestic abuse crimes recorded in Northern Ireland, which represents an increase of 10% on the previous

12 months, and is the highest since records began in 2004–05. We are seeing more domestic abuse, and I am not sure why that is. Is the cause social media, the society we live in, or do people have more addiction issues? I am not sure, but there is definitely more of it.

A study of 108 mothers who had been victims of domestic violence in Northern Ireland uncovered some horrendous statistics: 90% of children in these homes were aware that violence was occurring; 75% had witnessed violence at home; and 27% of the children had themselves been physically abused by the violent partner. Those numbers may be increasing because more people are reporting domestic abuse. Although the rise in reports is a success, whatever way we look at it, homes are being torn apart and children are being scarred for life by it.

I overheard my parliamentary aide speaking with a friend of hers whose partner was threatening violence and, even though the friend tried to qualify that by saying that it was the first time he had done it, my aide said something that stuck in my mind, because it might be the first time, but that might lead to a number of times. My aide said to her friend, “Okay. So will it be okay the first time your daughter hears that from a man? Because if it is okay for her to watch and hear you going through it, then she will believe it is okay for her to go through and accept it.” If it is okay for the mother, is it okay for the child? I do not think so. We were able to help that young girl and her three children to find a safe place and get help. We need to be able to help children who watch and live through the abuse, even if they are not touched—that is so important.

I hope that the Minister will acknowledge in her response, which I know will be positive, that the issue is not just about how we help mothers, but their children. That is the thrust of the debate. I also look forward to the response from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), with whom I have worked on many issues. We need support systems in place for children to prevent them from repeating the cycle by becoming the abuser they have witnessed or accepting abuse as the norm. We need better systems in place to provide help, counselling and support for children who have witnessed domestic abuse—that must be a priority. Well-balanced children are not taught to bury pain but to express it in a helpful way. They need help to do so, and that is what we are asking for. I look to the Minister for an understanding of the strategy to improve support provided to children who witness domestic abuse and who, too often, are a part of its cycle. That has to stop, and it has to stop now.

4.47 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): The most common thing that women in refuges or community services have said to me is that they wish that there was something for their children—somewhere that their children could go to speak to somebody about what was happening at home. Although many of those women appreciated the support that was available to them, there was a hole for at-risk children, whether in classrooms or even in social services, with zero therapeutic support or play care support, or even just somebody at school who they could speak to and who would understand.

If the women of this country who have suffered domestic violence had written the Domestic Abuse Bill and had picked a single thing to ask for, they would have asked for their children to be supported. Across

the country, support for children who are victims of domestic violence is patchy at best. Sometimes it is done well. The organisation where I used to work has a huge team of children’s support workers, funded as a pilot project through the Home Office. Unfortunately, however, such things are often pilot projects that do not extend to everywhere in the country and often go to those places that are best at writing bids. As the bid writer, I am delighted that we had that project, but the reality in most parts of the country is that if a teenager who was suffering abuse stepped forward at school, or if a child in a primary school stepped forward to say something about what was happening at home with his mum and dad, there would be nowhere to send that child.

I am fairly well versed in the local domestic abuse projects where I live, and I have most of their mobile phone numbers, but I would not know where to send a child who needed therapeutic support in Birmingham, the second biggest city in the country. If provision is patchy where I live, I cannot imagine what it is like in Blaydon.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend, whose background is in this area, is making a really good speech. As a former children’s services manager in Birmingham, she is absolutely spot on when she says that there is nowhere to refer children, especially when even children on child protection plans are not given support. Does she agree that it is wholly inadequate not to recognise children in the definition?

Jess Phillips: I absolutely agree. The Domestic Abuse Bill gives us a real opportunity. We will not get the moon on a stick—the Bill will not give us everything—but the annual case load at Women’s Aid, where I used to work, involved on average 8,000 women and 16,000 children. Children’s names are written down on a form and their social work paperwork is in the file, but no one from my organisation would necessarily have laid eyes on them. A tiny fraction of them would have lived in refuge accommodation—less than 10% of the total number would have gone through that in a year—so we are talking about thousands of children in the west midlands who, every day, are without someone to confide in, to talk to, or to deal with the trauma they are feeling in their lives.

Anyone who sits for five minutes with people who have been child victims of domestic abuse, who have grown up in a home, will tell us that that trauma stays with them in adulthood. They are likely to suffer from PTSD and from problems within their own intimate relationships. All the findings from studies of crime data on knife crime or even terrorism show links to people who grow up in traumatised households. It is imperative for the future of those children and our country that we get this right. Children must be included in the Bill, and at the same time we must take a huge, wholesale look at funding for children’s services in the country. I ask the Minister directly: how many young people’s violence advisers and specialist children’s workers are there across England and Wales? The SafeLives data shows that it would cost only £2.5 million to provide those services across England and Wales. In the greater scheme of things, what it would save would be huge.

We are moving into an era when this will be talked about in schools. All of us in the Chamber have fought—some of us literally had to fight directly on the streets—to ensure that compulsory sex and relationship education

[Jess Phillips]

will be available in our schools. As we roll that out and talk about such subjects in schools, we must ensure that we do not open a door into an empty room. We must ensure that specialist training and specialist single points of contact are available to handle this in every school, and to handle it well.

The murder rate of women and girls was released the week before last. I have forgotten the name of the organisation, but the data was released: 144 women and girls were murdered last year. That is an increase of about 27 on the previous year. Those figures include the murder of girls younger than three. The reality is that we need to provide support for victims of domestic violence who are children, and it is also imperative that they are safeguarded. We need to start looking at where we are failing in the system of children's social care. To look at my own city again, I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) could tell horror stories about how the under-resourcing of children's services is leading to dangerous situations for the city's children.

I cannot stress one thing enough when it comes to the review being undertaken of the family court. All of us have been in meetings with the likes of Claire Throssell, whose children were burned in their home by a violent perpetrator who the family courts had allowed to have access to them, even though she had begged and pleaded against that. The presumption of access for domestic violence perpetrators has to end.

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): To build on the hon. Lady's point, the presumption in favour of access for a parent who in a criminal court would be considered a violent offender has a hidden dimension. Sometimes the perpetrator of domestic abuse will use the child as a pawn. Enhanced right of access will, typically, be used as a tool to torture the mother. The hon. Lady gave powerful figures not only for women who have been killed by domestic abuse but for children as young as three. She also gave an example of arson. That grim conclusion might not be reached, but children are still treated as pawns. They are placed with the perpetrator parent, in a highly dangerous situation, and they are denied access to their mother. That is a tool to torture the mother, and goodness knows what is happening. Another problem is the reporting restrictions in the family court, which make it difficult to know how the decisions are reached and the slipstream in which those children are moving.

Jess Phillips: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I have seen hundreds of cases in which access to a child is used simply to extend the abuse. Children become pawns, and that has a psychological effect on them. They are pulled about and told that they have to go somewhere, such that they do not feel safe. Their mothers have to watch on and say goodbye to their children, putting them into the custody of someone they do not believe to be safe. That is psychological torture in our family court system—although, thanks to its secrecy, we will never truly know. However, I am sent emails with reams of accounts about that exact thing happening, day in, day out. We have to stop wringing our hands.

The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service is also an issue with regard to the family court. CAFCASS provides support and services for perpetrators

to try to stop the perpetration of domestic abuse. I am not here to criticise that, but I note that CAFCASS does not provide the same support for women and children. I often found a disparity when people decided to fund local commissioned services for perpetrators. Again, I have no problem with that, but there was always a discrepancy between the amount of money that would go to the perpetrator project and the amount that would go to the project that ran alongside it for women and children. Double the number of people was always a fraction of the price, I noted.

Jim Shannon: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Jess Phillips: I will but for the last time, because I want to leave time for my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) to speak.

Jim Shannon: I am conscious of the psychological, financial and emotional ways in which a partner can put pressure on a wife and mother of the children. My office has dealt on many occasions with the issue of finance, where the male controls the money and the female and the children depend on him for finances. It is another nasty form of control. I have spoken about it many times, as has the hon. Lady.

Jess Phillips: The hon. Gentleman is right. We will welcome the Domestic Abuse Bill giving recognition to the issue of financial abuse. Things will only ever change if there are proper support services in every part of the country, to ensure that people can recognise financial abuse and that there is a route out.

People often say, "Why doesn't she leave?" When a woman leaves a domestic violence perpetrator, with her children, the risk that she will be murdered elevates. There is a pattern in all domestic homicide reviews and children's safeguarding serious case reviews: when people try to escape, the likelihood of their being murdered increases. That is one reason, but the other reason a woman might have nothing is that she will have no money. It is easy for us to say that we would leave, but it is very different in practice.

It would not be a day with me and the Minister if I did not mention the plight of migrant women, but my hon. Friend for Edmonton will talk much more about that, so I shall give her the time to do so. Until the Domestic Abuse Bill accounts for all victims, whether they be children or adult victims, and can guarantee at least an opportunity of safety—we cannot guarantee safety; no Government Department can, no matter how great—for every woman in this country who comes forward, homicide rates will not decline. The people whose names I will have to read out every year will increasingly be those of migrant women and children. I shall leave the Minister with that.

5.2 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to serve under your chairship, Mr Hollobone, and I look forward to doing so again in future. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing today's important debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for her usual passion in speaking about this important subject that needs a lot more forensic inspection, especially in the light of the Bill.

I speak not only as a Member of Parliament but as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on no recourse to public funds. I am particularly keen to contribute to this debate to speak up for those mothers who, as result of their immigration status, have had the condition of no recourse to public funds imposed on them, and who are also more likely to be subject to domestic abuse and less able to escape it. Children in those families are in an especially vulnerable position. The reality for thousands of families and children in this country is that if they find themselves in an abusive situation, they have no safety net to fall back on. Many of those families are presented with a choice: continued abuse or possible destitution. Nobody should have to make that choice.

The Children's Society's research found that between 2013 and 2015, more than 50,000 individuals with children had no access to mainstream welfare support. According to the University of Wolverhampton and the Greater London Authority, there are 250,000 undocumented migrant children living in the UK. I want to speak up for those families and children. They must not be forgotten in this debate and in the Bill.

No child should be more vulnerable to domestic abuse as a result of barriers placed in their way by the Government's hostile environment policy. The bottom line is that protection from domestic abuse must be provided regardless of immigration status. Yet, as it stands, those with no recourse to public funds are incredibly vulnerable to suffering from abuse and being trapped in an abusive cycle from which they cannot escape.

One common pathway for children to escape abuse is assistance from social services but, for many, that pathway is blocked because of their immigration status. Under section 17 of the Children Act 1989, local authorities have a duty to safeguard and promote the wellbeing of children in need. However, many families with no recourse to public funds find that route to safety totally blocked. Charities such as the Children's Society and Project 17 have even found that social workers have assessed that it is safer for children to be placed with an abusive parent than it is for them to face living with a parent who has no recourse to public funds. That is shocking.

Project 17's report "Not Seen, Not Heard: Children's Experiences of the Hostile Environment" contains multiple accounts of local authorities who refuse support to destitute families because their parents—generally, mothers—have a pending immigration application. Decisions such as those prevent survivors of abuse from seeking help from local councils, in effect removing their access to that vital support. As a result of Government cuts over the last 10 years, our councils' social services are under huge strain, but social services must never use a family's immigration status as a way of gatekeeping and preventing them from getting the help they need to escape. What will the Government do to prevent this appalling situation, and ensure that local authorities properly recognise their duty towards all children, regardless of immigration status?

We are debating the abuse of children. All children must be protected from abuse, under all circumstances. No ifs, no buts. The uncomfortable truth is that they cannot be protected properly while that support is dependent on the immigration status of a child's parents. I hope the Minister will agree that we cannot have a two-tier system when it comes to child abuse; there can

be no hierarchy of protection. For children and parents living in an abusive relationship, all barriers to receiving support and escaping their abusers must be removed. It is therefore vital that the Domestic Abuse Bill ensures that every migrant survivor of domestic abuse has access to public funds.

I hope the Government will look again at families with no recourse to public funds, and ensure that every child has full access to the support needed to escape abuse. It is time to recognise all survivors of domestic abuse, regardless of age, immigration status or entitlement to support. I hope that today's debate can be a step towards that.

5.8 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blydon (Liz Twist) on securing this important debate and on her wonderful advocacy of her constituent Christine.

It is welcome news that the Domestic Abuse Bill has returned to the House. As the Bill has only been published in the last couple of hours, I have not had a chance to familiarise myself with all of the changes, but it is up to us all to ensure that the Bill is robust, that it makes rapid progress through Parliament and that the new legislation is in place to protect victims as soon as possible. That includes the sometimes hidden victims of domestic abuse—the children. Some children may be living in homes where they are victims of physical, emotional or even sexual violence. For others, the psychological effects of seeing a parent suffering abuse can be just as damaging. All children who experience domestic abuse, be it as a victim or as a witness, must have protected places on all NHS waiting lists, including for mental health services. Likewise, they should be given priority access to school places if required, to give them parity with looked-after children. We must ensure that child victims of domestic abuse, who already face huge upheaval in their lives, do not experience unnecessary additional disruption or trauma.

We must also look at the role of the family courts in domestic abuse cases. I am pleased that the new enhanced Bill includes a wider ban on cross-examination of victims, but I have heard too many first-hand accounts of incidents in which the courts have let down the children they should be there to protect—incidents in which the safety and wellbeing of young people is overshadowed by the rights of perpetrators. No one who is awaiting trial, on bail or facing ongoing criminal proceedings for domestic abuse-related offences should be permitted unsupervised contact with their children. Family courts need to be accountable for prioritising the physical safety and emotional wellbeing of all the vulnerable young people they are there to protect.

We must also consider children in families with no recourse to public funds. There has been much discussion about migrant women with insecure immigration status, who struggle to find protection from domestic abuse. I understand that the Government have begun a review of what support can be provided, but those women and their children need urgent action. In addition, teenagers in abusive relationships all too often are not considered to be victims of domestic abuse, but they are.

We must never lose sight of how big an impact domestic abuse can have on children, both at the time of the experience and in the future. Although physical

[Carolyn Harris]

injuries may heal, the emotional and psychological effects of being a victim or a witness last a lifetime. I welcome the introduction of the Bill and eagerly await details of its Second Reading and Committee stage. The Bill is long overdue; we must not delay any longer. Protection for those affected by domestic abuse desperately needs to be brought into legislation. Survivors want to see it happen, victims need to see it happen, and the innocent, vulnerable children who are caught up in it all deserve to see it happen.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The Minister has oodles of time to respond, but if she brings her remarks to a conclusion by 5.27 pm, that will give Liz Twist time to sum up the debate.

5.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing this important debate about a subject that we all clearly care so much about. May I congratulate her on her timing as well? As she said, the Bill is back today.

I am delighted that my very first act as the Minister leading the Bill through the House is to respond to this incredibly important debate about the impact of domestic abuse on the lives of children, not just in the immediate term but in the much longer term. The hon. Lady articulated that extremely well with the example of her constituent Christine, who set out not just the impact on her own life but the long-term impact on the life of her daughter, who is now over the age of 18. I hope that everyone watching the debate realises that we all genuinely understand the impact that domestic abuse can have.

I am extremely grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who, as always, brought the perspective of a vital part of our United Kingdom to the Chamber. He made the point that domestic abuse affects many families in Northern Ireland. I hope he is pleased that we were able to remove from the latest iteration of the Bill the sections we were going to include to ensure that legislation is passed in Northern Ireland. Of course, we were able to do that because the Northern Ireland Executive is back. We have confirmation that the Executive intend to legislate on this important subject locally, which is as it should be. I am delighted by that development.

As was set out, we know that as many as one in five children in the UK are witness to or exposed to this awful crime type in their households. We know too that domestic abuse has a devastating impact on young people. Growing up in a household of fear and intimidation can have serious, long-lasting effects on the health, wellbeing and development of a young person. We know that children exposed to domestic abuse are more likely to experience mental health difficulties, to be excluded from school and to become victims of domestic abuse later in life. I do not for a moment say that is the life outcome of every child—of course it is not—but we must pay attention to the statistics and to the trends that we see in them.

The hon. Member for Blaydon rightly challenged the Government on why the definition has been set at the age of 16 and above. As I hope I have been clear when speaking about previous iterations of the Bill, that is something we have grappled with. In 2012, following a consultation, the cross-Government definition of domestic abuse was amended to include 16 and 17-year-olds, with the aim of increasing awareness of young people's experience of domestic abuse. Indeed, there was strong support for maintaining that age limit in responses to the domestic abuse consultation we held in 2018, which was part of the foundations of the Bill.

The concern is that lowering the age limit below 16 risks blurring the line between child abuse and domestic abuse between adults. Abuse perpetrated by an adult towards someone under 16 is classified as child abuse. We argue that the distinction needs to be maintained because, as colleagues will know, many interactions with social services and so on may flow from that definition.

We note that the Joint Committee on the Draft Domestic Abuse Bill, which scrutinised the draft Bill in huge detail and heard evidence from many witnesses, concluded that an age limit of 16 is the right one, but we are absolutely clear that the impact of domestic abuse on young people needs to be recognised properly, and that we must ensure that the agencies are aware of it and know how to identify and respond to it.

Jess Phillips: Are we therefore to assume that any child under 16 who suffered as a victim of domestic abuse, either directly or indirectly, would meet the threshold for child abuse and therefore should be reported to children's social care immediately by all the authorities that we would expect to report that? For example, should every schoolteacher who hears about something like that report it as child abuse? If so, what will the Government put in place to ensure that children's social care can deal with that?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady will appreciate that I cannot give a broad-brush answer for each and every case; clearly, every case must be treated on its facts. However, the definition of harm in the Children Act 1989—again, the Joint Committee looked at that very carefully—includes

“forms of ill-treatment which are not physical”

as well as

“impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another”.

We are therefore clear that the definition of harm in the 1989 Act includes witnessing and experiencing coercive control. From that, we concluded that the most effective way of trying to act on the Committee's recommendation with regard to that definition is to amend the Department for Education's statutory guidance, “Working together to safeguard children”. I hope that helps to clarify the point.

We are also clear that the impact of domestic abuse includes the impact on children living in households where abuse is conducted, teenage relationship abuse—the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) mentioned that—and abuse directed towards siblings and parents, which is perhaps one of the most hidden forms of abuse in a crime already typified by concealment and hiding.

We are seeking to address the very real points and concerns raised by Members and, indeed, others outside this House in a number of ways. First and foremost, the statutory guidance, which will sit alongside the definition in the Act—when it is passed, I hope—will specifically address the adverse impact of abuse on children. We are working closely with key charities such as Barnardo's, Action for Children and the Children's Society as well as the domestic abuse commissioner—the commissioner designate, I should say—the Children's Commissioner and many others to ensure that the guidance makes the impact on children clear.

To answer the question from the hon. Member for Blaydon, we will publish a draft version of the statutory guidance ahead of the Commons Committee stage to assist in scrutiny of the Bill. I genuinely encourage hon. Members and their networks of experts and survivors to consider that draft guidance and feed back to us on it, because we want to get it right.

Importantly, the Bill as introduced today includes a new statutory duty that will require tier 1 local authorities in England to provide support to domestic abuse victims and their children in refuges and other safe accommodation. That will result in the right level of tailored support for victims and their children across the country at the time of need, with improved recovery rates and the release of bed spaces as people rebuild their lives more quickly. We will ensure that local authorities receive appropriate financial support to meet the proposed duty.

Kate Osamor: Will the Minister expand slightly on the authority that the Government will be giving to local authorities? Will that include mothers who have no recourse to public funds but are experiencing domestic violence?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady knows that there is already provision under the domestic violence concession in some circumstances. I am pleased that she raised migrant women, because, as I hope she knows, alongside our introduction of the Bill the Government published today our further response to the Joint Committee's recommendations, and in that we set out our response to this particularly difficult situation. She will understand the complexity involved. At the moment, I am afraid, we are still reviewing the consultation responses, but we have said that we will set out our conclusions before Report stage in this House.

One of the key functions of the domestic abuse commissioner will be to encourage good practice in the identification of children affected by domestic abuse as well as the provision of protection and support to people, including children, affected by domestic abuse. Under the terms of the commissioner's appointment, they are required to have a thematic lead in the heart of their office to represent the interests of children. We are working with the commissioner to address some of the important points raised on community-based services and how those can be provided better across the country.

In terms of helping children above and beyond the law, the statutory guidance and so on, legislation can achieve so much, but much more needs to be done to address the impact on children. That is why in 2018 we launched the £8 million fund for children affected by domestic abuse, which funds projects that support children experiencing domestic abuse at home, focused on early intervention and reducing the impact of domestic abuse

on children's physical and mental wellbeing. Those projects are making a difference. We see those services really helping children and young people across England and Wales, supporting them through innovative practices and therapy.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) rightly raised the issue of schools. She will know of Operation Encompass, and we are funding the national roll-out of this fantastic project, which gives the police a set of simple procedures to enable them to communicate quickly and effectively with schools in relation to any pupils who may have been exposed to domestic abuse the night preceding the start of the school day. We all know examples of where the project has had a real impact. It will help schools provide timely and effective help to the pupils involved. Whereas children's social care intervenes only in the most serious cases, Operation Encompass enables every child to receive support, regardless of whether an incident is recorded as a crime. We have also provided £220,000 to develop and pilot a training programme for children and family social workers to improve awareness of coercive control, indicators of domestic abuse, and how best to support families.

Many Members have raised the impact and role of the family courts, not just in today's debate but in more general discussions. That is a critical part of our addressing this hidden crime. The welfare of the child is the family court's paramount concern when making any decision about their upbringing, including with whom the child is to live or spend time. The law is clear that the presumption in favour of contact with each parent will apply unless there is evidence to the contrary, such as in cases that may involve domestic abuse. We have revised a practice direction to set out procedure for the courts to follow when dealing with applications for child arrangement orders where domestic abuse is alleged, which makes it clear that the presumption of contact can be explicitly displaced—

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Atkins: I am so sorry; I have about 30 seconds left.

We have an expert panel to gather evidence to better understand how the family courts are responding, because we understand the concerns that hon. Members and survivors have expressed. The panel is working through a body of evidence and we expect its findings and recommendations for next steps to be published this spring.

I thank the hon. Member for Blaydon again for raising the issues in this debate, as well as all people not just in this place but outside who are working so hard to support the victims and survivors of domestic abuse, including children. We are committed to getting this Bill right. With their help, we can.

5.27 pm

Liz Twist: I thank all hon. Members who took part by speaking or intervening in the debate. There is much shared concern from everyone who raised an issue. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) referred to children as the forgotten victims of domestic abuse. The purpose of the debate is to ensure that they are not forgotten but properly cared for.

[Liz Twist]

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) talked about the support that is available. If there is patchy support in Birmingham, she said, how is it in Blaydon? We see very mixed provision across the country and it is important that we get that right. She also talked about access by perpetrators of domestic abuse to children and about the Home Office pilots. We all think these services need secure funding, not funding based on a bidding process and who writes the best paper. My hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) explained clearly the issues faced by migrant women and those with no recourse to public funds.

In the minute and a half left to me, I want to recapitulate some of the asks. We talked about revising the definition to include children, and I heard the Minister's statement and explanation about how she had grappled with the definition. I say to her: please grapple some more, because this is a really important

issue. Many organisations representing the interests of children are supportive of that move. The other big ask was to ensure that support services, whether accommodation-based or community-based, are available to all children so that they get what they need. This is not just a failure of financing; it is a failure to look after the most vulnerable children who face difficult situations. I ask her to look at that.

The Minister asked us to look at the guidelines and to provide feedback, and I have no doubt that many people and organisations will do that. I thank her for her comments and ask her to look again at those key asks to look after children.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered children and domestic abuse.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 3 March 2020

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Prescription Charges

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): The National Health Service (Charges for Drugs and Appliances) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 (“the Amendment Regulations”) will be laid before Parliament to increase certain national health service charges in England from 1 April 2020.

This year we have increased the prescription charge by 15p from £9 to £9.15 for each medicine or appliance dispensed. The cost of prescription pre-payment certificates (PPC) will also be increased: three-month PPC increases by 55p to £29.65 and 12-month PPC increases by £1.90 to £105.90. The increase is in line with inflation. Charges for wigs and fabric supports will also be increased in line with inflation. Details of the revised charges for 2020-21 can be found in the table below:

<i>Charge from 1 April 2020</i>	
<i>Prescription Charges</i>	<i>(£)</i>
Single Charge	9.15
3 Month PPC	29.65
12 Month PPC	105.90
Surgical Brassiere	30.05
Abdominal or Spinal Support	45.35
<i>Wigs and Fabric Supports</i>	
Stock Modacrylic Wig	74.15
Partial Human Hair Wig	196.40
Full Bespoke Human Hair Wig	287.20

[HCWS141]

Coronavirus

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): The four UK Governments have today published an action plan that sets out how we have responded so far and how we intend to respond going forward to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, which I am pleased to present to Parliament today. Copies of the plan are on <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-action-plan> and will be e-mailed to Members of both Houses and deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS142]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Domestic Abuse Bill

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I am pleased to announce that today the Government will be re-introducing the Domestic Abuse Bill in the House of Commons.

This landmark Bill will help better protect and support the victims of domestic abuse and their children and bring perpetrators to justice.

The measures in the Bill seek to:

Promote awareness—to put domestic abuse at the top of everyone’s agenda, including by legislating for a statutory definition of domestic abuse, emphasising that domestic abuse is not just physical and sexual violence, but can also be emotional, coercive or controlling, and economic abuse. Statutory guidance will accompany the definition to assist in understanding and dissemination of this important feature of the Bill, including taking account of the fact that the majority of victims of domestic abuse are women.

Protect and support victims, including by introducing a new domestic abuse protection notice and domestic abuse protection order, and placing a new duty on tier one local authorities in England to provide support to victims of domestic abuse and their children in refuges and other safe accommodation.

Transform the justice response, including by helping victims to give their best evidence in the criminal courts through the use of video evidence, screens and other special measures, and ensuring that victims of abuse do not suffer further trauma in family court proceedings by being cross-examined by their abuser.

Improve performance—the new Domestic Abuse Commissioner will help drive consistency and better performance in the response to domestic abuse across all local areas and agencies.

The Bill was originally introduced in July 2019 having had the benefit of pre-legislative scrutiny by a Joint Committee of both Houses, chaired by the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Maria Miller). In the Government’s original response to the Joint Committee’s report (CP 137), we undertook to publish a further response addressing the outstanding recommendations; the Government have today published this further response alongside the re-introduction of the Bill (CP 214). Copies of the further response will be available from the Vote Office and it will also be published on the www.gov.uk website.

Part 2 of the Bill establishes in law the independent office of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner. Clause 10 makes provision for a framework document which, in effect, sets out how the Home Secretary and the Commissioner will work together. The document deals with, among other things, matters relating to governance, and the funding and staffing of the Commissioner’s office. To assist the scrutiny of the Bill, I have today published a draft of the framework document which has been agreed with the designate Commissioner, Nicole Jacobs.

The draft framework document, together with other Bill documents including a revised impact assessment and policy equality statement are available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/domestic-abuse-bill>.

[HCWS144]

JUSTICE

Electronic Execution of Deeds: Government Response

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): The Government welcome the Law Commission’s report on electronic execution of documents, and I am very grateful to the commission for the detailed consideration it has given to this important topic.

I agree with the report’s conclusion that formal primary legislation is not necessary to reinforce the legal validity of electronic signatures. The existing framework makes clear that businesses and individuals can feel confident in using e-signatures in commercial transactions.

I endorse the commission's draft legislative provision as set out in the report, as reflecting the Government's view of the legal position on electronic signatures. They are permissible and can be used in confidence in commercial and consumer documents.

I accept the Law Commission's recommendation that an industry working group should be established, which the Government should convene. As the report demonstrates, notwithstanding the position in law, there are issues on the security and technology of electronic signatures that require further consideration from suitably experienced experts.

I will ask the industry working group to consider the question of video witnessing of electronic signatures.

The report highlights that technological advances have meant that the status of electronic signatures is also applicable in other fields of law, and I note that while this presents opportunities it also entails challenges. These include ensuring that reform does not have any adverse impact, particularly on vulnerable people.

That is linked to the Law Commission's recommendation that there should be a wider review of the law of deeds, which I accept. The Government will ask the Law Commission to undertake this review, although the timing

for the review will be subject to overall Government and Law Commission priorities given the volume of law reform work which exists.

[HCWS143]

TRANSPORT

Merchant Shipping Regulations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Kelly Tolhurst): By way of a consent order dated 18 February 2020, the Administrative Court has provided that the Merchant Shipping (Bridge Visibility) (Small Passenger Ships) Regulations 2019 (SI 2019/1025) are quashed and are of no effect. Consequently, the Merchant Shipping (Bridge Visibility) (Small Passenger Ships) Regulations 2005 (SI 2005/2286) have been reinstated and will continue to have effect. This order is the result of a judicial review claim.

I have, through the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, assessed the safety implications of this decision and believe that there are no regulatory safety concerns arising from it.

[HCWS140]

Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 3 March 2020

TREASURY

Tax Avoidance and Evasion

The following is an extract from the Opposition day debate on Tax Avoidance and Evasion on 25 February 2020.

Steve Barclay: We have also increased the penalties and consequences for those who devise, enable or use tax avoidance schemes. I draw the House's attention, for example, to the disclosure of tax avoidance schemes

regime, the general anti-abuse rule and the system of follower notices and accelerated payments, the last of which alone has brought in over £8.7 billion.

[Official Report, 25 February 2020, Vol. 672, c. 194.]

Letter of correction from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury:

An error has been identified in my contribution to the debate.

The correct information should have been:

Steve Barclay: We have also increased the penalties and consequences for those who devise, enable or use tax avoidance schemes. I draw the House's attention, for example, to the disclosure of tax avoidance schemes regime, the general anti-abuse rule and the system of follower notices and accelerated payments, the last of which alone has brought in **over £4.7 billion**.

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 3 March 2020

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MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Tuesday 3 March 2020

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**not later than
Tuesday 10 March 2020**

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Domestic Abuse [Col. 778]

Bill presented, and read the First time

Sentencing (Women) [Col. 779]

Bill presented, and read the First time

School Toilets (Access During Lessons) [Col. 779]

Bill presented, and read the First time

High Speed Rail (West Midlands — Crewe) [Col. 779]

Bill read the First, Second and Third times

Rule of Law (Enforcement by Public Authorities) [Col. 780]

*Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Sir Christopher Chope)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time*

Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill [Col. 782]

Read a Second and the Third time, and passed

Deputy Speaker's Statement [Col. 783]

Prisoners (Disclosure of Information About Victims) Bill [Col. 784]

Considered in Committee; as amended, considered; read the Third time and passed

Terms and Conditions of Employment [Col. 797]

Motions—(Alok Sharma)—agreed to

Petitions [Col. 806]

Climate Protests in Cambridge: Police Response [Col. 808]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Nursing Workforce Shortage: England [Col. 193WH]

Hammersmith Bridge [Col. 215WH]

Housing and Planning [Col. 222WH]

Innovation in the NHS [Col. 250WH]

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General Debates

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Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
